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Lobbyist referred to aid from Interior official

By Jon Kamman
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A second case has come to light in which once-mighty lobbyist Jack Abramoff asked a conservative environmental organization to prevail on a top-ranking Interior Department official to protect the casino interests of Native American clients.

The head of the quasi-political Council of Republicans for Environmental Advocacy, served as a go-between for Abramoff to solicit help from J. Steven Griles, then deputy to Interior Secretary Gale Norton, according to e-mails quoted by the Washington Post.

The Interior Department oversees Indian affairs, including whether a tribe may operate a casino.

Abramoff and a partner, Michael Scanlon, have been under criminal investigation by a federal task force for more than a year while a parallel investigation has been conducted by the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, whose chairman is Arizona GOP Sen. John McCain.

In addition, the Interior Department's inspector general has been looking into possible improprieties in how agency officials dealt with lobbyists.

The council's president is Italia Federici, who has described Griles as a friend. Her organization has claimed it is a tax-exempt interest group, but The Arizona

Republic found last spring that the Internal Revenue Service had no record of having granted tax-exempt status.

At Abramoff's direction, several of his tribal clients issued at least \$250,000 in contributions to CREA.

The latest connections to come to light among Abramoff, CREA and Griles involved attempts in late 2002 to stop a band of Pottawattamie Indians in Michigan from opening a casino near Grand Rapids that would compete with one operated by the Saginaw Chippewa tribe.

"This is a disaster in the making," Abramoff wrote Federici in appealing for her to alert Griles, according to an e-mail cited by the Post.

"This is the casino we discussed with Steve (Griles), and he said that it would not happen. It seems to be happening! The way to stop it is for Interior to say they are not satisfied with the environmental impact report. Can you get him to stop this one asap? They are moving fast. Thanks Italia. This is a direct assault on our guys, Saginaw Chippewa."

Shortly after, in another e-mail, Abramoff wrote, "I believe Griles has committed to do" the environmental tactic.

The casino ultimately was approved 2 1/2 years later, in May this year.

Abramoff also turned to Federici as plans progressed for the Jena Band of

Choctaws in Louisiana to open a casino that would compete with gambling operations by the Coushatta Indians, a tribe that paid Abramoff at least \$30 million for lobbying.

E-mailing Federici about a congressman's support for the Jena plan, Abramoff wrote, "This will be a PR disaster as you can imagine, especially if for some reason Interior agrees to approve this deal. . . . This is going to get really ugly. Please let Steve know about this. Thanks so much Italia!"

The Post also reported Sunday that investigators are looking into whether Griles, while dealing at least peripherally with Abramoff's requests, may have discussed going to work with him. Former associates of Abramoff said the lobbyist was trying to recruit Griles.

Federal laws prohibit government executives from negotiating for a job while involved in a matter of interest to the prospective employer.

CREA is an outgrowth of an organization founded by Norton and tax-reform advocate Grover Norquist in 1998.

Federici, who had worked on a Norton campaign in Colorado, took it over when Norton became Interior secretary.

Federici has refused requests by The Republic to openly discuss her group's funding, her involvement with Abramoff and Griles, and why an organization os-

tensibly concerned with environmental issues would intercede on behalf of Indian gaming issues.

Non-profit organizations are allowed to do limited lobbying on issues related to their mission, but political advocacy groups are supposed to register as such and disclose the source and use of their funding.

Abramoff, a Republican insider who raised at least \$100,000 for Bush's 2000 campaign, was indicted with an associate this month on fraud charges unrelated to lobbying. A federal grand jury accused the two of falsely claiming to have made a \$20 million payment when the pair bought a line of casino boats.

The Post said that Griles, who left the Interior Department this year and opened a consulting business, said through a spokeswoman that he never had anything to do with the Michigan band's casino issues.

Reporter Billy House and the Washington Post contributed to this article