

House Republican expands attack on environmental groups' global work

Center for Biological Diversity accuses Rep. Rob Bishop of using "amateurish McCarthy tactics."

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A top congressional Republican is ratcheting up his campaign against prominent U.S. environmental organizations, an effort critics are likening to a return of McCarthyism. So far, House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Rob Bishop (R-UT) has singled out two environmental groups well-known for their effective advocacy and legal work to protect the environment.

Bishop, a strong supporter of the fossil fuels industry and long-time opponent of public lands, sent a letter to the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) on Wednesday seeking documents about the group's environmental work on the island of Okinawa in Japan. In the letter, the congressman suggested the group's efforts are being used to impose additional costs on U.S. military activities in Japan. The U.S. military has a large presence on the island.

In response, CBD accused Bishop of abusing his position.

"Rob Bishop is the one working against American interests, first by trashing our national monuments and now its democratic principles at the behest of the fossil fuel industry," Kieran Suckling, CBD's executive director, said in a statement. "He's abusing his position, tarnishing the House of Representatives and making a fool of himself with these amateurish McCarthy tactics."

The letter comes two weeks after Bishop sent a similar letter to the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), demanding information about its work in China. Rep. Bruce Westerman (R-AR), chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee's Subcommittee on oversight and investigations, co-signed the two letters.

NRDC told ThinkProgress that it responded to Bishop's letter by the June 12 deadline given by the congressman, and remains in contact with committee staff.

In a separate letter, dated June 13, Bishop wrote to Defense Secretary James Mattis about lawsuits filed by NRDC and CBD. "We are interested in environmental litigation by U.S. based 501(c) organizations against the Department of Defense and its negative impact on our national security," Bishop and Westerman wrote in the letter to Mattis.

Bishop's letter pointed to work done by NRDC as far back as the 1990s that aimed to stop the use of sonar and underwater explosives by the U.S. Navy because of its impact on mammals. The lawmakers also cited a lawsuit filed by CBD that aimed to block the relocation of a Marine Corps air station in Japan because of its potential harm to a marine mammal, the Okinawa dugong. A court hearing on that case is scheduled for June 28.

"We can defend our country and protect our oceans at the same time — in fact, that's what the law requires," Bob Deans, director of strategic engagement for NRDC, said in response to Bishop's letter to Mattis. "The agreements we've reached with the U.S. Navy help to ensure the security and readiness of our naval forces in ways that protect marine mammals from needless harm."

The House Natural Resources Committee said it has been monitoring several environmental groups; thus far, NRDC and CBD are the only ones that have received letters from the committee questioning their work overseas. "The investigation will go where the evidence leads," a committee spokesperson said in response to the letter sent to NRDC.

Bishop said his committee is concerned that CBD's opposition to the relocation of a U.S. Marine Corps station on Okinawa "may require compliance with the Foreign Agents Registration Act."

"The Committee seeks clarification about the nature of CBD's advocacy work to influence U.S. environmental and natural resources policy in light of CBD's close relationship with Okinawan government officials and foreign environmental groups," Bishop's letter states, referring to a lawsuit CBD filed in 2003 over the relocation of the Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

Since its founding in 1989, the Center for Biological Diversity has been one of the most effective environmental groups at protecting ecosystems and endangered species. Bishop's claims against the organization come after the group targeted him as one of the worst members of Congress on issues related to public lands and the environment.

In March 2017, the group ranked Bishop as No. 2 on its list of "public lands enemies" — members of Congress who are "backed by fossil fuel corporations and other extractive industries that already squeeze massive profits out of America's public lands and only want more." Bishop's Republican colleague from Utah, Sen. Mike Lee, was named the greatest enemy of public lands.

In November 2015, a delegation of 27 political and community leaders from Okinawa visited the United States to seek support for its efforts to stop the U.S. military from building a large new base in what CBD described as the "biologically rich and sensitive" Henoko and Oura Bay.

That new base is strongly opposed by residents of the island, which has had a huge U.S. military presence since the end of World War II.

"Okinawa dugongs are facing extinction, a sad fact that the approval process for this project ignored. We stand with the Okinawan people in calling for a real environmental review and respect for local concerns," Peter

Galvin, CBD's director of programs, said in a statement issued during the visit by the Okinawa officials. "We shouldn't let the U.S. military continue to trash this biologically important region," he said.

In an attempt at "red-baiting," a tactic used by politicians during the Cold War to discredit groups and individuals opposed to U.S. policies, Bishop wrote in his letter that "many of the political parties and activist groups most vocally opposed to, and willing to take direction action against, the U.S. military presence in Okinawa are 'radical' groups like the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and Okinawan independence movement."

Basav Sen, director of the climate justice project at the left-leaning Institute for Policy Studies, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, said he believes Bishop is abusing his position and that his fishing expedition against environmental groups is "starting to look like McCarthyism."

By questioning CBD's contacts with foreign environmental groups, "the likes of Rob Bishop are quite intentionally using raw intimidation to try to undermine the necessary linking of global struggles for justice," Sen told ThinkProgress.

"The Trump administration and its congressional enablers are aware that a powerful international movement can reverse their push for more fossil fuels, hence their desperation to try to bully and silence the environmental movement," he said.

Bishop asked CBD to submit documents related to whether it has registered as a foreign agent. He also wants any documents from the group that identifies any transaction or payment it has received from any Japanese official, national, or business interest.

The committee chairman gave the environmental group until June 27 to submit the requested documents.