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# UK's Oil Consultant Contract For Climate Talks Sparks Concern

By Patrick GALEY

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Britain's decision to award the Boston Consulting Group a £1-million contract to help organise the UN's COP26 climate summit poses a "potential conflict of interest" due to its ties to fossil fuel companies, environmental groups have told AFP.

Ahead of the crucial negotiations aimed at accelerating emissions cuts and agreeing more ambitious net-zero targets, the industry watchdogs warned that BCG's involvement raised questions over how Britain was organising the event.

BCG on its website says it has "extensive experience working with leading upstream oil and gas clients worldwide" and that its experts have advised "19 of the world's 25 leading oil companies on some of their most pertinent strategic challenges."

It is also a former member of Oil and Gas UK, an influential lobby group.

The COP26 contract, worth £1.18 million (\$1.6 million) between BCG and Britain's Cabinet Office, ran from April 2020 to January 2021 for services that have been redacted from the original document.

The summit was originally scheduled for November last year, but was delayed until November 2021 due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) brings together nations, environmental groups, scientists and policymakers to work on measures to keep the goals of the Paris climate deal in play.

Trade associations that represent oil and gas majors are entitled under the convention's own rules to attend annual COP talks and inter-sessional meetings as observers.

They frequently host networking side events or presentations and have the same status and access permits at negotiations as environmental charities.

But there is currently no protection against potential conflicts of interest between nations which need emissions slashed rapidly in order to survive, and the biggest emitters whose business plans are still heavily reliant on fossil fuels.

In 2019, data obtained by AFP showed that thousands of representatives of fossil fuel companies had attended talks since 1990.

## **Make contracts public**

Observers of the UNFCCC process said that BCG's contract with the UK government raised questions over the legitimacy of Britain's organisation of COP26.

"This is just the latest example of how the forum meant to foster international collaboration to address the climate crisis has continued to legitimise the drivers of the crisis and their enablers, like BCG," said Rachel Rose Jackson, director of climate research and policy at the industry watchdog Corporate Accountability.

"The UK government should make all details of its contracts and meetings for COP26 with corporations as well as their trade associations or consultancy firms public at once, especially those with fossil fuel industry ties," she told AFP.

"Not doing so threatens the legitimacy of the meetings themselves."

BCG said it would not comment on the contract.

But a spokeswoman said: "BCG is committed to tackling climate change, both by addressing our own footprint and helping organisations across the world address theirs.

"We partner with clients in sectors where abatement is most difficult or where emissions are greatest, and feel it is our role to help them find solutions that will spark the greatest change and speed up progress toward net zero."

In a response to a Freedom of Information request from AFP, the Cabinet Office said it would not disclose further information on the nature of BCG's services as this "would be likely to prejudice the commercial interests of the supplier".

A UK government spokesman said: "COP26 will bring the world together to commit to real action on tackling climate change and delivering a green recovery, while showcasing the UK's global leadership."

He added that any contract relating to the summit's organisation was awarded in line with public sector procurement guidelines, and that BCG's services had not been retained for 2021

## **Conflict of interest?**

The British government has been keen to burnish COP26's green credentials, announcing in November that it would not accept sponsorship from fossil fuel companies.

Jean Su, energy justice director at the Centre for Biological Diversity, said BCG's involvement in the planning process posed a "potential conflict of interest by leaning on companies that have substantially profited from the climate emergency".

"We encourage the UK government to be a climate leader and put an end to the fossil fuel interests poisoning climate negotiations," Su told AFP.

Nathan Metenier, a youth climate advocate and youth adviser to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, said BCG's involvement was not in itself a problem.

But he voiced concern over the lack of transparency.

"How are we sure that if they advise fossil fuel companies those interests aren't going to get mixed up when it comes to the COP?" he told AFP.

"If governments have to be accountable... we should have a say on how they are organising it. The worry is that this big consulting firm is advising the worst companies in the world."