

[S.C. lawmakers call for law enforcement probe of bogus pro-utility emails;
Fake emails spur calls for investigation](#)

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Highlight: COLUMBIA - Lawmakers have demanded an investigation into a pro-utility email lobbying campaign that used people's names and addresses without their knowledge.

Body

COLUMBIA - Lawmakers have demanded an investigation into a pro-utility email lobbying campaign that used people's names and addresses without their knowledge.

The push for an investigation comes less than a day after The Post and Courier revealed a string of cookie-cutter, pro-utility emails that impersonated average South Carolinians. The fake messages appear geared to pressure lawmakers to support Dominion Energy's proposed \$14.6 billion takeover of SCANA Corp.

On Monday, the House speaker's office said it contacted the attorney general about the emails. Attorney General Alan Wilson's office, in turn, informed the State Law Enforcement Division about the questionable communications sent through a group called the Consumer Energy Alliance.

"We are certainly going to get the attorney general to look into this," said House Majority Leader Gary Simrill, a Rock Hill Republican who received several of the falsified emails.

"If you've got a utility or a group that is misappropriating people's identities, I think that is a real problem," said Senate Majority Leader Shane Massey, R-Edgefield.

The nonprofit group set up a system of sending prewritten messages supporting Dominion's deal to members of the S.C. Legislature. Dominion and the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce are both members of that industry-backed group.

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SCANA was a member of the group from 2014 to 2016, and paid \$10,000 annually to be part of the Houston-based organization, said Eric Boomhower, the company's spokesperson. SCANA had no knowledge of the group's activities in South Carolina, he said.

David Holt, president of the Consumer Energy Alliance, said the group orchestrated the "grass-roots" lobbying campaign after asking Dominion whether it should get involved. But the group itself, Holt said, was not to blame for the emails that impersonated state residents.

Dominion, a longtime member of the energy group, saw the text of the email before it was released to the public, but it didn't commission the email campaign, spokesman Chet Wade said. The company was kept apprised on the work before the fake emails emerged.

"The more we hear about this issue, the more we learn, the more it feels like there was a deliberate attempt to mislead the public by someone other than us or CEA," Wade said. "We are puzzled by it. We are disturbed by it."

The fake emails, Holt said, were sent from computers outside South Carolina. He declined to say how many illegitimate messages were sent.

The Consumer Energy Alliance, Holt said, supports lawmakers' and the attorney general's request for an investigation. The group will cooperate with whatever is asked of it, Holt said.

"We're as concerned as some of the legislators in the state are," Holt said. "In my opinion, we are on the same side as these legislators because our system was duped."

This isn't the first time the Consumer Energy Alliance has been involved in an episode where people's names were used to advocate for a pro-industry issue without their permission.

In 2014, the group sent a petition to Wisconsin regulators in support of a utility company's plans in that state. That petition was denied after several people said their names were wrongly included among the 2,500 people listed on the document.

A similar problem occurred in Ohio in 2016. In that case, state residents filed a complaint with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission after the Consumer Energy Alliance submitted 347 letters of support for a proposed interstate pipeline project.

The problem was at least 14 of those people said they didn't support the pipeline project and never gave the Consumer Energy Alliance permission to submit letters on their behalf. One of the Ohio residents who was named in a letter died 18 years earlier, according to the Cleveland Plain Dealer .

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The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission fielded the complaints, but in documents, the federal agency said it doesn't handle claims of "mail fraud. "

Holt blamed those past issues on groups and bloggers who "oppose energy and pipelines." He said the group was cleared of any claims of wrongdoing in both instances.

State lawmakers see the issue differently.

"It's a way for the utilities to do the marketing but to disguise who is doing it," said Massey. "To the average person, it makes it look like there are multiple groups supporting this deal."

Simrill, the Rock Hill Republican, is concerned about how these fake emails affect state lawmakers' interactions with their constituents.

"Unfortunately, this delegitimizes the real emails we get, because you starting thinking: Is this a ploy? Is this a fraudulent email?" Simrill said. "It has reverberations across the spectrum."



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Dear Rep. Simrill:

I'm writing today to express my concerns with the potential for higher electricity rates in South Carolina following the move by SCE&G and Santee Cooper to halt construction on its V.C. Summer nuclear power plant project last year. While electric rates already have risen substantially because of the project, I am concerned that actions by the Legislature could make matters even worse, negatively impacting families and our neighbors on fixed incomes – just as they come out of one of the harshest winters in recent memory.

Dominion Energy has offered to buy SCE&G's parent-company, SCANA, which would prevent SCE&G from having to file for bankruptcy – and help maintain lower electricity prices. As part of that deal, Dominion has committed to giving SCE&G electric customers a 5 percent rate reduction and cash payments of \$1,000 for an average household customer.

Electricity consumers in South Carolina already pay some of the highest rates in the country.

Any legislation that could push SCE&G into bankruptcy and drive electric rates even higher will make South Carolina less competitive nationally and directly hurt families and small businesses.

It is important that South Carolina legislators move quickly to strongly support a permanent solution that will help customers right now and ensure our electricity supply reliable into the future. Passing legislation which will block Dominion (or any other utility) from stepping up to help South Carolina ratepayers is not our best interests.

As you consider legislation to address the failed V.C. Summer nuclear project, please work to find a solution that will allow significant upfront benefits, long-term stability and lower rates for all South Carolina electricity users.

Sincerely,

Mr. William Barron

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Graphic

State law enforcement officials are being asked to open an investigation into fake emails that were sent to lawmakers. Those emails impersonated South Carolinians and pressured lawmakers to support Dominion's proposed takeover of SCANA. High Flyer©2017/Provided

A form email sent to House Majority Leader Gary Simrill, R-Rock Hill, warned him about the consequences of SCE&G going bankrupt. But the person whose name and address was attached to the email, William Barron, said he never sent it. Provided

By Jamie Lovegrove jlovegrove@postandcourier.com

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