



Written by [R. Cort Kirkwood](#) on February 25, 2025

Watchdog Group: Senator Whitehouse Legislation Benefits Wife, Creates Conflict of Interest

A watchdog group has accused Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) of ethical violations for lining the pockets of his wife's employer to the tune of more than \$14 million.

In a letter to Senate Ethics Committee Chairman James Lankford (R-Okla.) and Vice Chairman Chris Coons (D-Del.), the Foundation for Accountability and Civic Trust (FACT) says Whitehouse voted for legislation that shoveled the millions to an environmental outfit that employed his wife or paid her consulting firm.

Whitehouse's votes are a conflict of interest, FACT claimed. And indeed it's also a form of self-dealing because what financially benefits his wife benefits him.



AP Images
Sheldon Whitehouse

COMPLAINT FILED: For years Sen. Whitehouse's wife has been employed by organizations getting millions of taxpayer-dollars in grants. These circular relationships between elected officials, their spouses, lobby groups & NGO's need to be closely scrutinized. <https://t.co/2GWN3QhSp9>

— FACT DC (@factdc) [February 25, 2025](#)

Big Bucks for Ocean Conservancy

FACT laid out its case in a four-page letter from Executive Director Kendra Arnold.

Noting that Whitehouse's wife, Sandra, has toiled for the Ocean Conservancy since 2008, Arnold explained that the group paid "Whitehouse through her consulting firm Ocean Wonks LLC since 2017, and paid directly prior to that."

Since 2008, she wrote, the group has rifled the taxpayers' pocket 19 times and walked away with about \$14.2 million. It collected half of that loot in the fall of 2024, "all of which Senator Whitehouse directly voted for."

"In September 2024, Ocean Conservancy received a \$5.2 million federal grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) for marine debris cleanup," [Arnold wrote](#):

This grant was funded by the Biden Administration's "Bipartisan Infrastructure Law," a bill Sheldon Whitehouse supported and voted for. In December 2024, Ocean Conservancy also received \$1.7 million in federal funding from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to assist with marine debris cleanup. The grant was funded as part of the EPA's annual



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appropriations bill, which Sen. Whitehouse also voted for.

While these two grants alone appear to be a conflict of interest, it is even more egregious in the context of Senator Whitehouse's long history of working on legislation being lobbied for by organizations tied to his wife. Altogether, Ocean Conservancy has spent millions on federal lobbying expenses over the years on issues relating to oceans, climate change, and environmental cleanup — issues directly championed by Senator Whitehouse, a longtime member (and current Ranking Member) of the Senate's Environment and Public Works Committee and the co-founder of the Senate's so-called "Oceans Caucus."

As if that weren't fishy enough, Arnold wrote, Ocean Conservancy pushed Congress to pass legislation — introduced by none other than Senator Whitehouse in 2023 — called the International Maritime Pollution Accountability Act.

Ocean Conservancy "secured billions in funding for coastal restoration projects" in the act. Senator Whitehouse bragged about the "\$3 billion in grant funding for ports and coastal restoration among the 'Whitehouse-backed measures in the bill.'"

More on Wife Sandra, Senate Ethics Rules

Ocean Conservancy isn't the only enviro-group stuffing big bucks into Sandra Whitehouse's purse.

She "has been paid by other organizations that have lobbied the Senate on legislation connected to her husband and received government contracts or federal funds," [Arnold explained](#).

That last allegation showed up in an [ethics complaint last year](#) from Judicial Watch:

The professional activities of Mrs. Whitehouse have created clear conflicts of interest with Senator Whitehouse's official duties. Not only has Senator Whitehouse not abstained from voting on environmental legislation that directly benefits his wife's clients (and thus, his wife), but he has repeatedly sponsored legislation that contains authorization for, and appropriation of, numerous federal environmental programs that fund activities undertaken by his wife's clients, which constitute a "limited class" of beneficiaries for such federal funds.

Citing the Daily Caller, Judicial Watch told Coons and Lankford that Whitehouse had introduced legislation on almost two dozen issues that involved his wife's consulting work.

Thus did [Arnold cite Senate Rule 37](#), which forbids what the senator has done:

A Member ... shall not receive any compensation, nor shall he permit any compensation to accrue to his beneficial interest from any source, the receipt or accrual of which would occur by virtue of influence improperly exerted from his position as a Member.... No Member, officer, or employee shall knowingly use his official position to introduce or aid the progress or passage of legislation, a principal purpose of which is to further only his pecuniary interest, only the pecuniary interest of his immediate family, or only the pecuniary interest of a limited class of persons or enterprises, when he, or his immediate family, or enterprises controlled by them, are members of the affected class.

The rules also address cases such as this where a senator's action that benefits his wife in fact benefits



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him. That's called [self-dealing](#).

The rule also forbids even the appearance of impropriety.

"Senator Whitehouse directly voted for legislation that recently led to \$6.9 million of taxpayer funds being paid to an organization for which his wife works and receives an income from," [Arnold wrote](#):

This circular relationship appears to be directly contrary to the Senate rules that broadly prohibit Senators from using the power of their office to benefit or appear to benefit themselves or their spouses.

Arnold's letter contains 16 footnotes that make FACT's case against Whitehouse.

[Ocean Conservancy told](#) Fox News that "Dr. Sandra Whitehouse, a well-respected marine ecologist and ocean policy consultant, has not received compensation from these federal grants allocated to Ocean Conservancy."

Maybe, but Ocean Conservancy also knows that [money is fungible](#).

Fox News also observed that FACT "works primarily to draw attention to potential Democratic lawmaker ethics violations. "

Another skilled Democrat self-dealer is Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, [who funneled](#) almost \$3 million in campaign money to her husband's consultancy for the 2020 elections.



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