

Carruthers led effort backed by tobacco firm

LAS CRUCES — After the Environmental Protection Agency declared second-hand smoke a cancer-causing carcinogen in 1992, further fueling government restrictions on smoking in public places, the tobacco giant Philip Morris formed an organization dedicated to cultivating doubt about the scientific basis for increased regulation.

Carruthers, Republican governor of New Mexico from 1987 to 1990 and currently one of five finalists for the presidency of New Mexico State University, was chairman of TASSC from 1993 to 1998, according to his résumé. It was a paid position, but is listed under the “public service” portion of his résumé.

During that period, from 1993 to 2003, Carruthers was also president and CEO of Cimarron Health Plan, a health insurance company.

Carruthers is now dean of NMSU’s College of Business, a position he has held since 2003.

In an interview this week, Carruthers, 73, downplayed his role as the public head of TASSC and distanced himself from Philip Morris’ agenda.

Carruthers said that he is and was unaware of the tobacco company’s role in creating TASSC, that pushing back against smoking restrictions was not something he did, and that he did not “lobby” for Philip Morris.

“I’m four-square against second-hand smoke,” Carruthers said. “I don’t think people should smoke, and second-hand smoke is detrimental to

other people's health."

Carruthers said he ended his relationship with TASSC after five years because "I disagreed with the management and the direction of the organization at the time." He declined to specify the nature of the disagreements, but at one point said he came to believe the organization developed a "crusade mentality."

Carruthers disagreed with critics who said TASSC painted government research on second-hand smoke, or environmental tobacco smoke, as politicized. "I think we were arguing for sound science to be used in public policy generation, which has been my position for a long, long time," he said.

He said he did not question the APCO representative, who recruited him to head TASSC, about what client the firm represented or the nature of its agenda. He said he could not recall what he was paid for his work as chairman.

"Frankly, I was not terribly engaged with them," said Carruthers, whose name appeared on fundraising material distributed nationwide by TASSC. His name also appeared on TASSC editorial pieces and he acknowledged visiting corporate leaders to expand the coalition's base.

In an undated TASSC editorial the group sent to news media under his name, Carruthers said: "... It is in the field of public policy that this



Garrey Carruthers, Ph.D., Vice President for Economic Development and Dean, College of Business, New Mexico State University

trend toward politically correct science is most evident. Consider, for example, how extremist environmental and other special interest groups have sought to prevail on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to control, regulate and ban products of all kinds. In order to persuade EPA to act, these groups search around for scientific evidence — any evidence — that will justify these actions.”

TASSC’s role in Philip Morris’ then-secret campaign to push back against smoking regulation has been cited in chapters in several books, such as “Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco to Global Warming,” by Erik Conway and Naomi Oreskes, a history professor at the University of California at San Diego.

Documentation of Philip Morris’ creation of TASSC through its public relations consultant, APCO, is publicly available in a digital archive of tobacco industry internal documents managed by the University of California at San Francisco. The documents were made available pursuant to legal settlements.

Concerned about its own lack of credibility in the public mind, Philip Morris needed an organization perceived as independent to carry its message, so Philip Morris kept its role in TASSC’s formation quiet, the authors wrote. In a September 1993 memo to a Philip Morris communications director, an APCO official described the development of TASSC. “APCO will direct and manage the activities of Garrey Carruthers and other key leaders participating in TASSC,” the memo says. “This includes developing and maintaining his schedule, prioritizing his time and energies, and briefing Carruthers and other appropriate TASSC representatives.”

Oreskes, in an email to the Journal, said she was disturbed by the prospect of a Carruthers NMSU presidency.

“TASSC was an organization whose goal was not to advance science, but to challenge and impede it. The idea that a former chairman of TASSC could be put forward to head a university system, which should be dedicated to information, not disinformation, is truly frightening,” Oreskes wrote.

Asked how he would reassure the public, students and faculty that he would safeguard the integrity of unbiased research at NMSU if named president, Carruthers said: “I’ve advocated the use of good science in public policy all my life.”

About whether his chairmanship of TASSC was compatible with heading a university, Carruthers said: “I think anybody who promotes sound science in public policy can lead a university. I don’t have any reservation about that whatsoever. Not whatsoever.”

Carruthers declined to comment on whether he thought Philip Morris’ actions in secretly creating TASSC, which described itself as a grass-roots group, were unethical. “I don’t want to judge the ethics of Philip Morris,” Carruthers said. “That’s for someone else to judge.”

In NMSU paperwork designed to avoid conflicts of interest, Carruthers states he is the principal investigator on a \$250,000 per year grant from the Daniels Foundation for a “very aggressive program” to develop “curriculum and programs for ethics education of our students and the public.”

The NMSU Board of Regents is scheduled to hold a closed-door executive session from noon to 5 p.m. today to discuss the presidential selec-

tion ahead of naming the president May 10.