

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

October 2, 2017

The Honorable Mary L. Kendall
Deputy Inspector General
U.S. Department of the Interior
Office of Inspector General
1849 C Street NW - Mail Stop 4428
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Ms. Kendall:

I write to request an investigation into Secretary Ryan Zinke's use of taxpayer funds for travel. Reports emerged last week about private charter and military flights for the Secretary and his staff that raise questions about the propriety of the flights.

The costs and numbers of chartered flights are unclear and deserve scrutiny. One flight from Las Vegas to Kalispell cost taxpayers \$12,375.¹ For privately chartered flights between St. Thomas and St. Croix, the Department "could not give a cost estimate for the private airfare but said tickets for Zinke and staff were paid out of the agency's budget".^{2,3} Despite the Department's equivocation, E&E news reported that the flights cost \$3,150.⁴

The information about the flights came to light during a review of government contracts, which means there could be more. The Secretary claims he has only taken 3 chartered flights since being confirmed in March.⁵ However there were four flights chartered for the Department

¹ Harwell, Drew, and Lisa Rein, *Zinke took \$12,000 charter flight home in oil executive's plane, documents show*. The Washington Post, 28 Sept. 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2017/09/28/59533ed8-a4b8-11e7-ade1-76d061d56efa_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_zinketravel-1105pm%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.cb403ca35dae. Accessed 29 Sept. 2017.

² Ibid.

³ Lefebvre, Ben, *Interior Secretary Zinke traveled on charter, military planes*. Politico, 28 Sept. 2017. <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/28/ryan-zinke-charter-military-planes-interior-243280>. Accessed 29 Sept. 2017.

⁴ Colman, Zach, *Zinke flight costs \$12K after event with pro hockey team*. E&E News, 29 Sept. 2017. <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1060062089>. Accessed 29 Sept. 2017.

⁵ Lefebvre, Ben, *Zinke calls travel controversy 'a little B.S.'* Politico. 29 Sept. 2017. <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/29/zinke-responds-travel-controversy-a-little-bs-243306>. Accessed 29 Sept. 2017.

between St. Thomas and St. Croix alone, raising questions about whether other Department staff and leadership are taking undisclosed chartered flights as well.⁶

The purposes of the taxpayer-funded trips deserve scrutiny. Each of the trips using private chartered flights, as well as several military and commercial flights involved events that may not be taxpayer-reimbursable. Events include a motivational speech for a major campaign donor, several weekend trips near Secretary Zinke's homes in Santa Barbara and Montana, a GOP event in which he spoke for President Trump, and a ski-resort fundraiser for a Senate campaign.⁷ Because the Secretary's spouse is leading a senate campaign in Montana,⁸ tax-payer funded travel for Mrs. Zinke, especially to or from Montana, deserve heightened scrutiny.

Claims that the Secretary's full schedule required the use of chartered aircraft deserve scrutiny. It appears as though Secretary Zinke and his staff could have taken a commercial flight from Las Vegas to Montana if he did not attend the motivational speech to the hockey team⁹ owned by his friend and campaign contributor, Bill Foley.¹⁰

Despite receiving substantial negative press, and despite Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price's recent resignation over his use of privately chartered flights, Secretary Zinke made clear he will continue to use them.¹¹ Secretary Zinke was found to have improperly billed the federal government for travel to his residences when he was a Navy SEAL as well. The incidents likely prevented him from receiving promotions he would have otherwise gotten.¹²

I urge you to provide a full accounting of the facts and a determination of consistency with the law as well as Department guidelines. If you have questions please contact Vic Edgerton of the Committee on Natural Resources staff at (202) 225-6065.

⁶ Harwell, Drew, and Lisa Rein, *Zinke took \$12,000 charter flight home in oil executive's plane, documents show*. The Washington Post, 28 Sept. 2017.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Henry, Devin. Interior secretary's wife tapped to lead GOP challenge to Montana senator. The Hill. 07 Sept. 2017. <http://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/349630-interior-secretarys-wife-tapped-to-lead-gop-challenge-to-montana>. Accessed 02 Oct. 2017.


⁹ Colman, Zach. *Zinke flight costs \$12K after event with pro hockey team*. E&E News, 29 Sept. 2017.

¹⁰ Harwell, Drew, and Lisa Rein, *Zinke took \$12,000 charter flight home in oil executive's plane, documents show*. The Washington Post, 28 Sept. 2017.

¹¹ Yachnin, Jennifer, *Zinke vows to continue charter travel; no plans to repay*. E&E News, 29 Sept. 2017. <https://www.eenews.net/greenwire/2017/09/29/stories/1060062175>. Accessed 29 Sept. 2017.

¹² Drew, Christopher, and Sean D. Naylor, *Interior Nominee Promotes Navy SEAL Career, While Playing Down 'Bad Judgement'*. The New York Times, 16 Jan. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/16/us/politics/ryan-zinke-navy-seal.html?mcubz=3>. Accessed 29 Sept. 2017.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources



A. Donald McEachin
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight
and Investigations