

INTERIOR

Republicans press for Zinke travel details

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Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke is facing mounting questions over his official travel. Lance Cheung/Agriculture Department

Two top House Republicans now have joined the chase for information about Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke's travel.

Democrats have for days been escalating their **demand** for details. Now Natural Resources Chairman Rob Bishop (R-Utah) wants documents on Interior's overall travel policies, as well as the particulars on Zinke's use of private chartered aircraft.

"Federal officials should be held to the highest ethical standard in adhering to these rules," Bishop said in a statement accompanying his **letter** to the department, which was also signed by Arkansas Republican Rep. Bruce Westerman, who leads the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations.

"When violations occur, the public deserves to know," Bishop continued. "When willful violations occur, there should be consequences. When partisan opportunists conflate

diligent conformance to scandal, no one wins. Let's get all facts on the table, ensure taxpayers are protected and proceed with the peoples' business."

The lawmakers want by Oct. 17 documents related to policies and guidelines for secretary travel when using government-owned, rented, leased or chartered aircraft as well as each use of those aircraft by a secretary since Jan. 20, 2009.

The Interior inspector general is also investigating the secretary's travels ([E&E News PM](#), Oct. 2).

Ahead of a scheduled policy address at the Heritage Foundation on Friday, Zinke spent several minutes defending his use of noncommercial airplanes on three occasions since being sworn into office ([Greenwire](#), Sept. 29).

"Before we get started, I'd just like to address, in the words of Gen. [Norman] Schwarzkopf, a little B.S. on travel," Zinke said.

News reports surfaced last week that Zinke took a charter flight from Las Vegas to Montana in late June after speaking to a political donor's professional hockey team in Nevada. Taxpayers were billed \$12,375 for the flight through Choice Aviation LLC.

Zinke defended that trip, as well as two other charter flights involving travel in the Arctic with the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee and between St. Croix and St. Thomas of the U.S. Virgin Islands. He noted the agency's ethics office had approved each of the trips.

'Sitting in coach'

Reporters yesterday asked Bishop if he thought Zinke's use of chartered planes was appropriate.

"You can't always get a commercial jet that goes from Puerto Rico to St. Thomas. Using [military aircraft], if it's already going in the [same] direction, that makes some kind of sense," the chairman said.

Bishop, who flies regularly to his Utah district, said he's been seated before near Zinke on commercial flights out West.

"When I have seen Zinke, he is sitting in coach," said Bishop. "I've been stuck across the aisle from him, which really ticks me off, too."

Bishop yesterday said he didn't know whether he was going to send a letter to Interior asking for more information on the matter. But he indicated interest in travel practices at the department and whether Zinke's use of noncommercial flights deviated from the norm.

"My supposition is that it's not abnormal," Bishop said. "That's a supposition; I don't know if that's accurate or not," he said, adding, "that's why we need to get some data."

Bishop sent the missive late yesterday and made it public today.

Interior did not immediately respond to questions about the Republicans' request. But spokeswoman Heather Swift stressed that Zinke's trips obtained approval and said the secretary had no intention of reimbursing operators.

"The secretary's official government travel is paid for by the department like other secretaries before him," she said.

The House Republicans' request underscores the potential political risks for Zinke, coming not long after the resignation of Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price following revelations of his extensive travel on private planes.

The spotlight now is on all secretarial travel. White House budget chief Mick Mulvaney on Friday issued a memo to agency leaders reminding them of the administration's policies on travel.

"With few exceptions, the commercial air system used by millions of Americans every day is appropriate, even for very senior officials," he wrote.

Boat trip

Sea travel could also emerge as a problem for Zinke.

The group **Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility** today released documents that show Zinke used a National Park Service boat to take him, family members and two fishermen for a three-hour tour of the Channel Islands National Park after a Junior Ranger swearing-in ceremony in April.

Use of the government ship cost taxpayers about \$4,000. NPS asked Zinke to pay \$142 for his wife and another family member, something the secretary in June, according to the documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act.

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