

January 10, 2018

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

Dear Ms. Kendall,

On December 29, 2017, Newsweek reported that documents obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request showed the Department of the Interior misused funds appropriated to the National Interagency Fire Center office in Boise, Idaho to pay for Secretary Zinke's unrelated air travel. The article reported:

“Officials initially said Zinke’s July 30 helicopter trip could be covered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the National Interagency Fire Center, a hub for the organization of response to wildfires—even though the secretary did not visit any fire zones that day, according to internal emails obtained by Newsweek. But after Newsweek questioned the line item, an Interior Department spokeswoman said this week that the chopper—listed in an accounting of Zinke’s travel as costing \$39,295—’was charged to the account in error.’”¹

The National Interagency Fire Center coordinates federal, state, and private fire suppression forces and is responsible for activities like dispatching aircraft, crews, equipment and supplies across the United States during wildfire disasters. Program funding is critical for saving lives and averting even larger natural disasters.


Amidst the most expensive wildfire season in history, it is unequivocally intolerable that the Interior Department could be wasting scarce taxpayer resources that are meant to save lives.

¹ Newsweek, December 29, 2017; www.newsweek.com/ryan-zinke-interior-department-helicopters-wildfires-757857

This incident, taken with past reports of Secretary Zinke's potential abuse of government-sponsored air travel--including chartered private flights to his home state and around the US Virgin Islands² and helicopter rides around Washington D.C. -- demonstrate a troubling pattern of disregard for taxpayer dollars.³

Therefore, as a member of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee tasked with oversight of Interior Department activities, I ask that you audit any expenditures from the preparedness subaccount of the Department of the Interior's Wildland Fire Management Account since Secretary Zinke was confirmed.

Respectfully,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator

² Politico, September 28, 2017; www.politico.com/story/2017/09/28/ryan-zinke-charter-military-planes-interior-243280

³ Politico, December 7, 2017; www.politico.com/story/2017/12/07/ryan-zinke-helicopters-dc-212730