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Committee Report Identifies Weaknesses in DOI'S Ethics Program

WASHINGTON, D.C., September 9, 2014 - An investigative [report](#) entitled “*Ethics Under Review: An Oversight Investigation into the Department of the Interior’s Ethics Program and How Recusals are Managed for Senior Officials*” was released today by the House Natural Resources Committee’s majority oversight staff. The report is the result of more than two years of investigation by Committee staff that identified weaknesses in how the Department of the Interior manages its ethics program, including the timeliness of its review of financial disclosure forms and its advice about recusals to political appointees.

Tomorrow, Department of the Interior Solicitor Hilary Tompkins will be testifying at a Full Committee oversight hearing. The Department’s Office of the Solicitor is the chief legal advisor for the entire Department of the Interior and oversees the Department’s Ethics Office.

“For decades, under both Democrat and Republican Administrations, there have been problems with the ethics program at the Department of the Interior. These problems appear to be ongoing and should be directly addressed. A strong, independent ethics program is necessary to ensure the integrity of the Department’s actions and officials,” **said House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Doc Hastings (WA-04).**

Specifically, the report found:

- The Department has made improving its ethics program a goal in recent years, but challenges remain in changing a bureaucratic culture to make ethical conduct, accountability, and transparency a priority.
- There are significant delays in the time period for reviewing financial disclosure forms used to identify potential conflicts of interest. In two examples reviewed, the Department’s ethics officials took more than 400 days to complete their review and approve financial disclosure forms for two senior officials.
- The Department’s senior ethics official says she was directed not to interact with or provide advice directly to political appointees without receiving management approval.
- The Department lacks a systematic way of tracking recusals, which increases the potential that officials will be contacted about or become involved in matters they are recused from.

The report also examined two specific ethics cases involving former Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Director Robert Abbey and Former Counselor to the Secretary Steve Black.

- Although Abbey was recused from matters involving his former consulting firm, he continued to interact with his a former business partner on both personal matters and official business. The former business partner was often contacted to act as a go between with Abbey and appears to have served as an informal advisor.
- Black promoted a renewable energy project to the White House involving his girlfriend’s employer and reported his relationship to Department ethics officials only after meeting with a company official and receiving an email discussing her possible transfer from the company’s California office to Washington, D.C. In the six months between when Black first reported his relationship with a lobbyist for the company and he was advised to recuse himself, he continued to work on specific matters involving the company and meet with senior company officials.

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