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Sent: Wed 2/14/2018 11:11:05 PM
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EPA changes its story on Pruitt's first-class travel

By Eric Wolff, Emily Holden and Alex Guillén

02/14/2018 05:55 PM EDT

EPA on Wednesday retracted its claim that Administrator Scott Pruitt has received a "blanket waiver" to fly first class whenever he travels, after POLITICO pointed officials to federal travel rules that appeared to bar such arrangements.

Pruitt has been routinely flying first class at taxpayers' expense after securing what EPA spokesman Jahan Wilcox had described as "blanket waiver," POLITICO reported Tuesday. But the General Services Administration says federal rules require agencies' oversight staffers to sign off on officials' first- or business-class travel "on a trip-by-trip basis ... unless the traveler has an up-to-date documented disability or special need."

Wilcox changed his explanation after POLITICO pointed out that section of the regulations. GSA does allow first-class travel for security reasons, but only if agencies request a waiver for each trip.

"As such, for every trip Administrator Pruitt submits a waiver to fly in either first or business class," Wilcox said, amending the agency's earlier statement, which yielded criticism from Republican lawmakers and led Democrats to request an inspector general investigation.

A GSA spokesperson confirmed its ban on blanket waivers to POLITICO Wednesday but would not discuss Pruitt's specific circumstances.

The EPA spokesman said anyone seeking additional details about Pruitt's travels would have to formally request them under the Freedom of Information Act, a process that can take months or years. In fact, the agency has not yet responded to POLITICO's June request information about travel authorizations.

Two House Democrats asked an agency watchdog earlier Wednesday to review EPA's "blanket waiver" policy.

The questions add to growing scrutiny over the high-flying travel expenses of President Donald Trump's Cabinet, five months after former HHS Secretary Tom Price stepped down following POLITICO's reporting on his use of more than $1 million in taxpayers' money for trips on private jets and government planes.

Pruitt and his staff say he can't fly coach because of security concerns. He regularly purchases first-class tickets on trips as short as D.C. to Boston and on long-haul flights to the Middle East.

But Norm Eisen, the former top ethics lawyer for the Obama administration and a critic of Trump, said Pruitt should not be allowed to routinely ignore regulations that are meant to ensure government officials do not waste taxpayer dollars.

"It's nonsense, whereas no such thing as providing a blanket waiver of that kind. It's contrary to all ethics practices," Eisen said. "If you're going to use the people's money in this way, there needs to be an individual waiver each time."

Information about Pruitt's travel expenses has come out only in response to specific public records requests, including one that a court ordered EPA to respond to in mid-January from a watchdog group called the Environmental Integrity Project. It's not possible to tally how much Pruitt has spent on first-class trips in total, but The Washington Post reported over the weekend that in early June, Pruitt and other EPA staff racked up more than $90,000 in travel bills.

Records also show Pruitt spending $1,641 for a flight from D.C. to New York City and back — a route that often costs as little as $250 with a few days' notice.

Pruitt also may have an armed agent flying with him at the first-class price level, but EPA excluded some of the travel records in its disclosure to the environmental group, citing security concerns.

Pruitt's high-priced trips run contrary to the practices of previous administrations, when top EPA officials typically flew coach, and ethics officials allowed first-class trips only in special circumstances. Staffers for President Barack Obama's EPA chief, Gina McCarthy, recall her flying coach to and from Africa and Asia.

Some Republican lawmakers have criticized Pruitt's flights, adding to angst over other

Trump officials' travel practices. Besides Price, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin have been under scrutiny for their expenses.

Eisen, now chairman of the liberal watchdog group Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, said that when he was working in the White House from 2011 to 2014 he only rarely allowed non-coach travel, when State Department officials had to make flights of 14 hours or more. Trips of that length justify first-class tickets, according to federal regulations.

GSA rules clearly prohibit blanket authorizations for commercial flights in virtually all circumstances.

"Blanket authorization of other than coach-class transportation accommodations is prohibited and shall be authorized on an individual trip-by-trip basis, unless the traveler has an up-to-date documented disability or special need," the Federal Travel Regulation says.

However, agencies can apply waivers to use government aircraft, in certain situations.

Other former federal officials speaking on background said they'd also never heard of a blanket waiver.

An advance staffer for an Obama-era Cabinet member said first class didn't seem to offer security benefits.

"Security [staff], in my experience, doesn't care so much what cabin the principal sits in," the former advance staffer said. "They care much more about where their seat is in the plane."

EPA's Office of Inspector General, which investigates threats against Pruitt, said last fall that he received up to five times as many threats as his immediate predecessor, McCarthy.

It is not clear how many of those threats have been deemed credible; the instances revealed so far have included threatening tweets and a menacing postcard. The internal watchdog did not immediately respond to a request on Wednesday for updated statistics on threats against Pruitt.

A former TSA official noted that everyone who flies, in coach or otherwise, is subject to security screening.

"Everyone in that aircraft went through TSA security screening," the official said. "It's a safe environment like you'd go through the Capitol building on Capitol Hill. Everyone has gone through a metal detector, same as on an aircraft."

Other security experts told POLITICO that there are genuine protective advantages to traveling in first class.

Airlines will often work with high-profile travelers to board them separately from the general public. Flying first class also grants access to secured lounge areas, and first-class passengers disembark first. And while in the air, the first-class area is more tightly controlled than coach.

"You want to minimize as much potential problems as you can," said Joe Funk of TorchStone Global, a private security firm. Funk spent 21 years in the Secret Service and more recently provided security for presidential candidates Obama, Mitt Romney and Jeb Bush.

"If you reduce the exposure of your protectee, your VIP, from the entire airport audience to a smaller group that is in the lounges, you've eliminated or minimized" threats, he added.

While flying first class could allow Pruitt access to special lounges where there are fewer passengers waiting for a plane, former federal agency staffers say VIPs are often offered that option even with just a coach ticket. Some airports ask high-level officials to disembark directly to their vehicles rather than walking through the terminal, a former EPA staffer said. And armed guards and the people they are protecting typically board planes first, former government employees familiar with the process said.

"As much as you can keep your principal away from other people," you should, said John Sexton of Sexton Executive Security in Fairfax, Va.

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