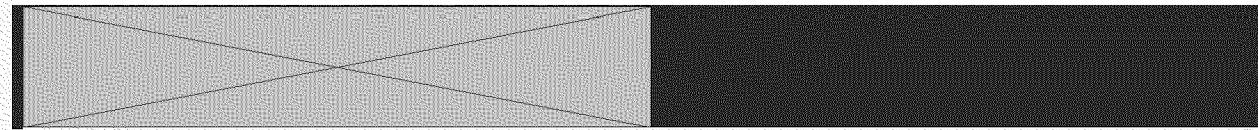


To: Jackson, Ryan[jackson.ryan@epa.gov]
From: The Washington Post
Sent: Wed 9/13/2017 4:00:37 PM
Subject: Federal Insider: Interior's 'unusual' transfer of senior executives spurs official probe



Interior's 'unusual' transfer of senior executives spurs official probe

By Joe Davidson

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke testifies during a Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee hearing in June. (Michael Reynolds/EPA)

It doesn't smell right, so maybe an official probe will tell if it's rotten.

The Interior Department's Office of Inspector General (OIG) is examining the extraordinary and politically suspect reassignment of dozens of Senior Executive Service (SES) members.

The OIG's review is in response to a request from eight Democrats on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. They asked for the probe after one Interior senior executive, Joel Clement, wrote a Washington Post article that said he was reassigned and "retaliated against for speaking out publicly about the dangers that climate change poses to Alaska Native communities."

Nancy K. DiPaolo, an OIG spokesperson, said the assessment could take a few months and that "you can expect the review to list out what facts are found."

In a letter led by Sen. Maria Cantwell (Wash.), the Democrats requested the IG action because of "troubling newspaper reports of the arbitrary reassignment of as many as 50 Senior Executive Service employees of the Department of the Interior. ... Any suggestion that the Department is reassigning SES employees to force them to resign, to silence their voices, or to punish them for the conscientious performance of their public duties is extremely troubling and calls for the closest examination."

On Monday, Cantwell welcomed the review, saying "there are serious

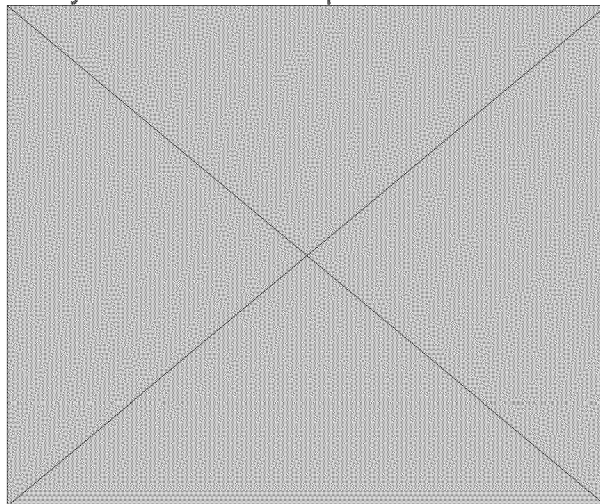
questions that need to be answered about the treatment of public servants who have dedicated their careers to the Department of the Interior.”

While reassignments of individual senior executives are encouraged to provide broad experience, mass transfers of this magnitude are unheard of. And given the scarcity of confirmed political appointees at the department, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke’s reassignment of more than 20 percent of the senior executive corps could be particularly disruptive. Out of 18 presidentially appointed slots requiring Senate confirmation at Interior, only three are filled, per data from The Washington Post/Partnership for Public Service tracker. Of six assistant secretary offices, which work directly with senior executives, none is filled.

A statement from Zinke’s press office said “senior executives are the highest paid employees in the federal government and signed up for the SES knowing that they could be called upon to work in different positions at any time. Congress meant for the SES to be a mobile force that are capable of taking on different assignments to meet the needs of the agency. Personnel moves among the Senior Executive Service are being conducted to better serve the taxpayer and the Department’s operations.”

Clement said he hopes the OIG’s review looks “closely at the motivations behind the reassignments, the cost to taxpayers, and the impact on Interior’s mission and American health and safety. A thorough investigation and report could help restore the plummeting morale at an agency whose mission is under attack by its own political leaders.”

Clement has a separate whistleblower retaliation complaint that is being investigated by the Office of Special Counsel.



In a message to his members, Bill Valdez, president of the Senior Executives Association, notes the "great concern about the reassignments and their potentially corrosive effect on morale and career leadership effectiveness at affected agencies. Even if a reassignment is legal, that doesn't necessarily make it a net benefit to the agency if it causes career SES to question the motives of their political leadership."

Blunter was Shelby Hallmark, a former chair of the association's Board of Directors. An article, headlined "A Dangerous Moment for Career Senior Executives" that he wrote for *Government Executive*, called the transfers "a preemptive strike." Hallmark said the transfers "seemed designed to disrupt the functioning of the agencies involved, and likely to drive as many executives as possible into retirement or quiescence. Zinke could not possibly have assessed the strengths and weaknesses of all these executives."

Max Stier, president and chief executive of the Partnership for Public Service, a good-government organization that studies federal workplace and management issues, agreed that "mass transfers within the SES certainly is unusual" and posed "three big questions":

- How well was the process managed?
- Does Interior have an organizational vision that is furthered by the

transfers and have officials communicated that to their senior
You received this email because you signed up for Federal Insider or because it is included in your subscription. For additional free newsletters or to manage
We respect your privacy. If you believe that this email has been sent to you in error or you no longer wish to receive email from The Washington Post, [click here](#). [Contact us](#)
The fact that they are missing so many political appointees," he added, "makes it harder to do this right."

It's not right, contend 15 law and public policy professors supporting Clement. "The reassignment of over one-fifth of all Senior Executives within an agency is more akin to the spoils system that our country abandoned over a century ago," argued their letter, led by Joshua A. Geltzer and Robert Friedman, both with the Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection at the Georgetown University Law Center.

The letter continued: "One can fairly anticipate that, if allowed to stand, these initial reassignments will denigrate both and, at the same time, embolden the current administration to continue to push the boundaries of acceptable personnel practices."

MOA for Federal Workers: Proposal for bigger buyouts

Staff writer Juliet Eilperin contributed to this report.

Read more:

[Is Trump making the political environment for top civil servants worse?]

[Trump creates 'hostile environment' for federal government scientists. One speaks out about reprisals]

[I'm a scientist. I'm blowing the whistle on the Trump administration.]

[Senate Democrats call for an investigation of climate scientist whistleblower complaint]

[Zinke moving dozens of senior Interior Department officials in shake-up]

buyout maximum for federal employees from \$25,000 to \$40,000.

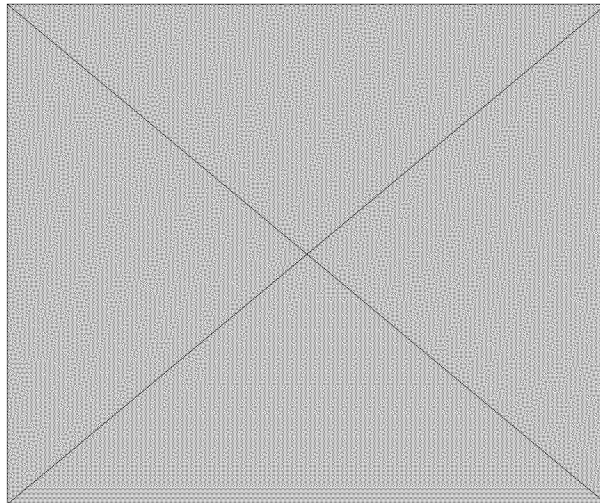
By Eric Yoder • [Read more »](#)

video reflects pride and Trump counterpoint

sometimes privately, sometimes for all to see.

By Joe Davidson | Columnist • [Read more »](#)

ADVERTISEMENT



Recommended for you

The Energy 202
environment debate.
[Sign Up »](#)

Share Federal Insider: [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#)

Trouble reading? [Click here](#) to view in your browser.

You received this email because you signed up for Federal Insider or because it is included in your subscription. For additional free newsletters or to manage your newsletters, [click here](#).

We respect your [privacy](#). If you believe that this email has been sent to you in error or you no longer wish to receive email from The Washington Post, [click here](#). [Contact us](#) for help.

©2017 The Washington Post, 1301 K St NW, Washington DC 20071