

# Department of Conservation

## Investigations of Improper Activities by State Employees, July 2006 Through January 2007

### INVESTIGATION I2006-0908 (REPORT I2007-1), MARCH 2007

#### *Department of Conservation's response as of September 2007*

We investigated and substantiated an allegation that an employee with the Department of Conservation (Conservation) engaged in various activities that were incompatible with his state employment, including using the prestige of his state position and improperly using state resources to perform work for the benefit of his spouse's employer, a charitable organization.

#### **Finding #1: The employee misused state resources to engage in improper activities.**

We found that the employee misused state resources to engage in numerous activities that were incompatible with his state employment, including misusing the prestige of his state position. We believe that the nature and extent of these improper activities caused a discredit to the State. Specifically, the employee engaged in the following improper activities:

- Failed to disclose stock ownership in oil industry companies and regulated companies.<sup>1</sup>
- Owned stock in a company at the time he issued permits to that company.
- Used state time and resources for fundraising.
- Solicited charitable contributions from oil industry companies and regulated companies.
- Used his state position to assist a charity.
- Requested and received personal discounts from a state vendor.
- Sent more than 65 e-mails that were insubordinate or of a nature to discredit the State.

The employee owns or has owned stock in a number of oil industry companies, including at least two regulated companies (Company A and Company J). However, he failed to disclose his ownership of stock in these companies, in violation of the Political Reform Act of 1974 (act).

As required by the act, Conservation requires the employee, who works in Conservation's Division of Oil, Gas & Geothermal Resources (division), and others in his job classification to annually complete

<sup>1</sup> The employee is required to disclose his stock ownership in companies regularly engaged in oil and gas exploration and related industries (oil industry companies), which includes regulated companies.

#### *Investigative Highlights . . .*

##### *An employee at the Department of Conservation:*

- » *Failed to disclose his stock ownership in at least 18 instances.*
- » *Owned stock in two companies at the time he made business decisions affecting those companies.*
- » *Misused state resources to assist his spouse's employer.*
- » *Used his state e-mail to directly solicit donations from oil industry and regulated companies.*
- » *Used the prestige of his state position to obtain discounts on his personal cell phone purchases.*
- » *Sent more than 65 e-mails that were insubordinate or were of such a nature to cause a discredit to the division.*

*In addition, the employee's manager failed to adequately monitor the employee's improper activities and failed to disclose his own stock ownership in at least seven instances.*

statements of economic interests because these employees have the authority to approve permits that allow companies to extract or produce oil or geothermal resources. Accordingly, the employee, his manager, and others in their job classifications are required to include on their statements of economic interests any investments in, interests in business positions in, and income from any business entity of the type that may be affected by their decisions. This includes, but is not limited to, stock ownership with a value of \$2,000 or more in businesses that are regularly engaged in the extraction and/or production of oil, gas, or geothermal resources.

We obtained the employee's statements of economic interests for each year from 2000 to 2005. In each statement, the employee certified under penalty of perjury that he had no reportable business interests. However, information the employee stored on his state computer that he later confirmed as accurate indicated that the employee failed to disclose reportable investments every year during this time period. In particular, we found for those years at least 18 instances where the employee failed to disclose that his stock ownership in various companies exceeded \$2,000 in value.

In addition, we believe the employee conducted himself in a questionable manner when he communicated with and approved permits for Company A, a company whose stock he owned at the time he approved its permit requests. Specifically, we believe that in doing so the employee may have violated the common law doctrine against conflicts of interest (doctrine). Similarly, we believe he also violated the doctrine when he made business decisions affecting Company B, the division's vendor for cellular phone services, while he owned stock in that company. The doctrine provides that a public officer is implicitly bound to exercise the powers conferred on him with disinterested skill, zeal, and diligence and primarily for the benefit of the public. Because he owned stock at the same time he approved permits for Company A and made purchases in his state capacity from Company B, we question whether the employee was able to make these business decisions with disinterested skill for the primary benefit of the State.

Further, we found that the employee misused his state e-mail—as well as other state resources—in a number of ways, and engaged in activities that were incompatible with his state employment while assisting his spouse in securing contributions on behalf of her employer, a charitable organization (Charity 1) in various capacities. These activities include soliciting donations from regulated companies even though he had been admonished for doing so in the past, and using his state position to facilitate Charity 1's potential purchase of a property on which he previously performed regulatory work.

The employee used his work e-mail account to send or receive more than 340 e-mails involving discussions of Charity 1 activities and events over the three-year period we reviewed. Nearly 80 of these e-mails involved soliciting donations for Charity 1 and in several instances he directly solicited donations from either oil industry or regulated companies. Many of the 340 e-mails indicate that the employee spent considerable state time and resources when serving as co-chairperson for an annual sponsorship event benefiting Charity 1 by assisting in planning and organizing the event and soliciting sponsorship donations from regulated and other oil industry companies for the event.

The employee also misused his state e-mail and improperly used his state position to facilitate Charity 1's attempt to purchase property from a property owner with whom he had previously interacted in his regulatory capacity as a state employee. The employee violated state law and Conservation's policy prohibiting its employees from using the prestige of their state positions for the gain of themselves or others when he contacted the property owner on behalf of Charity 1.

Moreover, the employee serves as the contact for the division's vendor for cell phone services, Company B. In this capacity, he has regular dealings with representatives of Company B. On two separate occasions the employee requested Company B to waive a \$35 fee associated with his personal cell phone purchases. In his e-mail requests, the employee informed Company B that a large number of Conservation offices switched to Company B based on his recommendations. One could easily surmise from this request that Company B may have felt compelled to provide the discount in exchange for his continued efforts to recommend Company B to other Conservation offices. The employee's e-mail records show that Company B's representative agreed to waive the fee on both occasions.

Finally, our review of the employee's e-mail records also indicates that he regularly misused his state e-mail and engaged in a pattern of behavior that likely could be considered insubordinate or apt to cause a discredit to the State. Specifically, for the three-year period we reviewed, the employee sent or received more than 130 e-mails regarding personal financial matters. Most of these e-mails pertain to the potential value of specific stocks. At least 15 of them involved discussions of potential investments in either the oil industry or oil and gas industry companies. Further, we found that the employee sent more than 65 e-mails to coworkers, superiors, representatives of oil industry and regulated companies, and others that we believe were insubordinate or were of such a nature as to discredit the division.

***Conservation's Action: Partial corrective action taken.***

Conservation reported that it pursued adverse action against the employee and he resigned from state service. In addition, Conservation reported it has taken action to ensure that similar misconduct is not repeated. Included in its corrective action, Conservation stated that it has:

- Developed a web page that its employees can use to review ethics and conflict-of-interest requirements.
- Established an internal ethics advisory panel.
- Required all employees who complete statements of economic interests to complete the Attorney General's online ethics training seminar.
- Continued an internal investigation to ensure that the misconduct is not more widespread than identified in our report.

**Finding #2: The manager failed to adequately monitor the employee and failed to disclose his own interests in oil industry companies.**

Information the employee stored on his state computer indicates that the manager should have known that the employee was involved in charitable functions involving regulated companies and Charity 1. These documents show that the manager participated in the annual charity event in 2005 and 2006 for which the employee and a representative of a regulated company were co-chairpersons in 2006. Additionally, these documents indicate that nine oil industry companies were sponsors for the event. We determined that six of them had previously submitted applications to the manager's district office for approval. Thus, it appears that the manager was aware—or should have been aware—that the employee was again soliciting donations from the regulated companies.

Documents stored on the employee's state computer also indicate that Company L, a company engaged in an industry related to oil and gas exploration, paid the manager's \$150 entry fee for the annual charity event in 2006. When we questioned the manager, he stated that he was not certain whether Company L paid his entry fee but said he did not pay the fee. The manager added that he also did not pay for his entry into the previous year's event and stated that it was not uncommon for oil industry companies to pay for his entry into similar events. When we reviewed information relating to the annual charity event held in 2005, we found indications that Company M, which has submitted applications to the manager's office for his approval, paid his entry fee for the event. By accepting gifts from companies his office regulates, the manager may have violated conflict-of-interest laws and policies that prohibit a state employee from receiving any gift from anyone seeking to do business of any kind with the employee or his department under circumstances from which it reasonably could be substantiated that the gift was intended to influence the employee or was intended as a reward for official actions performed by the employee.

Finally, in the course of our interview, the manager also acknowledged that he has owned stock in a regulated company as well as in other oil and gas industry companies. Specifically, the manager informed us that in 2004 he held stock exceeding \$2,000 in value in three oil and gas industry companies, including Company A, and four oil and gas industry companies in 2005. When we asked why he did not report his ownership of stock in regulated companies on his annual statement of economic interests, the manager responded that he did not believe he owned enough to require him to report them.

*Conservation's Action: Partial corrective action taken.*

In addition to taking the corrective actions Conservation reported for finding #1, it also placed the manager on administrative leave while it further investigates his actions.