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VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

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Re: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear Freedom of Information Act Officers:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552 and the implementing regulations for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 7 C.F.R. Part 1, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

Media reports indicate that between September 13 and 15, 2017, HHS Secretary Tom Price chartered five flights on private jets to conduct official government business.¹ Further reports indicate that Secretary Price's unusual use of taxpayer dollars for private jet travel has attracted the attention of the HHS Office of the Inspector General, which is investigating these reports of

¹ See Dan Diamond & Rachana Pradhan, *Price's Private-Jet Travel Breaks Precedent*, POLITICO (Sept. 19, 2017, 10:30 PM), <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/19/tom-price-chartered-planes-flights-242908>.



“potentially inappropriate travel.”² The reports about Secretary Price are not the first concerning hints that senior administration officials are raiding public funds to pay for questionable travel: the Treasury Office of the Inspector General is also reviewing Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin’s reported use of a government plane to travel with his wife to view the solar eclipse in Fort Knox, and Mr. Mnuchin also reportedly requested use of a government plane for his honeymoon.³ Other reports indicate that other officials have been using private jets for their government trips.⁴ American Oversight seeks records that will inform the American public of how senior government officials are choosing to spend taxpayer dollars.

Requested Records

American Oversight requests that USDA produce the following within twenty business days:

Records sufficient to identify each time the Secretary has booked or used any air travel other than scheduled, commercial service for official government business, including use of government-owned or government-leased aircraft, chartered aircraft, or aircraft owned by a business entity or private individual. For purposes of this request, travel is “for official government business” if the travel involves attendance or participation at any meeting or event within the purview of the Secretary’s official duties, even if some or most of the trip involves personal activities.

The search for responsive records should include all individuals and locations where records are likely to exist, including the Office of the Secretary and all offices involved in making travel arrangements or receiving, approving, paying, reimbursing, or auditing travel expenses for the Secretary. Please provide all responsive records from April 25, 2017, to the date the search is conducted.

In addition to the records requested above, American Oversight also requests records describing the processing of this request, including records sufficient to identify search terms used and locations and custodians searched and any tracking sheets used to track the processing of this request. If your agency uses FOIA questionnaires or certifications completed by individual

² Dan Diamond, *OIG: Investigation of Tom Price’s Charter Travel is ‘Underway,’* POLITICO (Sept. 22, 2017, 1:06 PM), <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/22/tom-price-charter-travel-inspector-general-243024>.

³ Aaron Blake, *The Trump Administration’s Private Plane Problem*, WASH. POST, Sept. 20, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/09/20/the-trump-administrations-private-plane-problem/?utm_term=.a4ffb6b9b02f.

⁴ Tarini Parti, *At Least Three Wealthy Trump Officials Used Private Jets for Government Work*, BUZZFEED (Sept. 21, 2017, 4:44 PM), https://www.buzzfeed.com/tariniparti/at-least-three-wealthy-trump-officials-used-private-jets?utm_term=.cpEvyj8MQ4#.pu3nQmNbB8; Peggy Drexler, *Trump’s Rich Cabinet Needs Private Jets. Don’t We All?*, CNN (Sept. 22, 2017, 9:13 PM), <http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/22/opinions/trumps-rich-cabinet-needs-private-jets-dont-we-all-drexler/index.html>.

custodians or components to determine whether they possess responsive materials or to describe how they conducted searches, we also request any such records prepared in connection with the processing of this request.

American Oversight seeks all responsive records regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics. In conducting your search, please understand the terms “record,” “document,” and “information” in their broadest sense, to include any written, typed, recorded, graphic, printed, or audio material of any kind. We seek records of any kind, including electronic records, audiotapes, videotapes, and photographs, as well as letters, emails, facsimiles, telephone messages, voice mail messages and transcripts, notes, or minutes of any meetings, telephone conversations or discussions. Our request includes any attachments to these records. **No category of material should be omitted from search, collection, and production.**

Please search all records regarding agency business. **You may not exclude searches of files or emails in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts.** Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files is subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.⁵ **It is not adequate to rely on policies and procedures that require officials to move such information to official systems within a certain period of time; American Oversight has a right to records contained in those files even if material has not yet been moved to official systems or if officials have, through negligence or willfulness, failed to meet their obligations.**⁶

In addition, please note that in conducting a “reasonable search” as required by law, you must employ the most up-to-date technologies and tools available, in addition to searches by individual custodians likely to have responsive information. Recent technology may have rendered your agency’s prior FOIA practices unreasonable. **In light of the government-wide requirements to manage information electronically by the end of 2016, it is no longer reasonable to rely exclusively on custodian-driven searches.**⁷ Furthermore, agencies that have adopted the National Archives and

⁵ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, 827 F.3d 145, 149–50 (D.C. Cir. 2016); cf. *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Kerry*, 844 F.3d 952, 955–56 (D.C. Cir. 2016).

⁶ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016) (“The Government argues that because the agency had a policy requiring [the official] to forward all of his emails from his [personal] account to his business email, the [personal] account only contains duplicate agency records at best. Therefore, the Government claims that any hypothetical deletion of the [personal account] emails would still leave a copy of those records intact in [the official’s] work email. However, policies are rarely followed to perfection by anyone. At this stage of the case, the Court cannot assume that each and every work-related email in the [personal] account was duplicated in [the official’s] work email account.” (citations omitted)).

⁷ Presidential Memorandum—Managing Government Records, 76 Fed. Reg. 75,423 (Nov. 28, 2011), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/28/presidential-memorandum-managing-government-records>; Office of Mgmt. & Budget, Exec. Office of the President, Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments & Independent Agencies,

Records Agency (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies, now maintain emails in a form that is reasonably likely to be more complete than individual custodians' files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but your agency's archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight insists that your agency use the most up-to-date technologies to search for responsive information and take steps to ensure that the most complete repositories of information are searched. American Oversight is available to work with you to craft appropriate search terms. **However, custodian searches are still required; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.**

Under the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, agencies must adopt a presumption of disclosure, withholding information “only if . . . disclosure would harm an interest protected by an exemption” or “disclosure is prohibited by law.”⁸ If it is your position that any portion of the requested records is exempt from disclosure, American Oversight requests that you provide an index of those documents as required under *Vaughn v. Rosen*, 484 F.2d 820 (D.C. Cir. 1973), *cert. denied*, 415 U.S. 977 (1974). As you are aware, a *Vaughn* index must describe each document claimed as exempt with sufficient specificity “to permit a reasoned judgment as to whether the material is actually exempt under FOIA.”⁹ Moreover, the *Vaughn* index “must describe *each* document or portion thereof withheld, and for *each* withholding it must discuss the consequences of disclosing the sought-after information.”¹⁰ Further, “the withholding agency must supply ‘a relatively detailed justification, specifically identifying the reasons why a particular exemption is relevant and correlating those claims with the particular part of a withheld document to which they apply.’”¹¹

In the event some portions of the requested records are properly exempt from disclosure, please disclose any reasonably segregable non-exempt portions of the requested records. If it is your position that a document contains non-exempt segments, but that those non-exempt segments are so dispersed throughout the document as to make segregation impossible, please state what portion of the document is non-exempt, and how the material is dispersed throughout the document.¹² Claims of nonsegregability must be made with the same degree of detail as required for claims of exemptions in a *Vaughn* index. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically that it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.

You should institute a preservation hold on information responsive to this request. American Oversight intends to pursue all legal avenues to enforce its right of access under FOIA, including litigation if necessary. Accordingly, your agency is on notice that litigation is reasonably foreseeable.

“Managing Government Records Directive,” M-12-18 (Aug. 24, 2012), <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/m-12-18.pdf>.

⁸ FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 § 2 (Pub. L. No. 114-185).

⁹ *Founding Church of Scientology v. Bell*, 603 F.2d 945, 949 (D.C. Cir. 1979).

¹⁰ *King v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 830 F.2d 210, 223-24 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (emphasis in original).

¹¹ *Id.* at 224 (citing *Mead Data Central, Inc. v. U.S. Dep’t of the Air Force*, 566 F.2d 242, 251 (D.C. Cir. 1977)).

¹² *Mead Data Central*, 566 F.2d at 261.

To ensure that this request is properly construed, that searches are conducted in an adequate but efficient manner, and that extraneous costs are not incurred, American Oversight welcomes an opportunity to discuss its request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or duplication costs. By working together at the outset, American Oversight and your agency can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in electronic format by email or in PDF or TIF format on a USB drive. Please send any responsive material being sent by mail to American Oversight, 1030 15th Street NW, Suite B255, Washington, DC 20005. If it will accelerate release of responsive records to American Oversight, please also provide responsive material on a rolling basis.

Fee Waiver Request

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 7 C.F.R. Part 1, Subpart A, Appendix A, Section 6(a), American Oversight requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records. The subject of this request concerns the operations of the federal government, and the disclosures will likely contribute to public understanding of those operations. Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.

American Oversight requests a waiver of fees because disclosure of the requested information is in the public interest because “it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government.”¹³ The disclosure of the information sought under this request will document and reveal the activities of the federal government, including how an agency head determines how and when to spend taxpayer dollars on non-commercial flights.¹⁴ Taxpayers deserve to know whether officials are using their money responsibly or misusing it for unnecessarily luxurious travel. Although media reports have included general statements from agency spokespeople regarding official travel practices, only specific records reflecting actual use of non-commercial flights will allow the public to determine whether Secretary Price’s misuse of public funds is an isolated abuse of authority or a widespread feature of the Trump administration. Therefore, the requested records would make a significant contribution to the public’s understanding about these government operations and activities.¹⁵ And because there has already been substantial demonstrated public interest in senior officials’ use of private jets for official travel,¹⁶ these disclosures will contribute to “an understanding of the subject by the general

¹³ 7 C.F.R. Part 1, Subpart A, Appendix A, Section 6(a).

¹⁴ 7 C.F.R. Part 1, Subpart A, Appendix A, Section 6(a)(1)(i)-(ii).

¹⁵ 7 C.F.R. Part 1, Subpart A, Appendix A, Section 6(a)(1)(1)(iv).

¹⁶ See, e.g., Steve Benen, *Tom Price’s Private-Jet Travel Raises Eyebrows*, MSNBC (Sept. 20, 2017, 11:28 AM), <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/tom-prices-private-jet-travel-raises-eyebrows>; Aaron Blake, *The Trump Administration’s Private Plane Problem*, WASH. POST (Sept. 20, 2017, 11:53 AM), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/09/20/the-trump-administrations-private-plane-problem/?utm_term=.70cb8421802c; Diamond & Pradhan,

public.”¹⁷ And, as described in more detail below, American Oversight’s website and social media accounts demonstrate its ability and intention to effectively convey information it receives to the general public.¹⁸

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.¹⁹ As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the information requested is not in American Oversight’s financial interest. American Oversight’s mission is to promote transparency in government, to educate the public about government activities, and to ensure the accountability of government officials. American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media. American Oversight also makes materials it gathers available on its public website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.²⁰ American Oversight has demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content. For example, after receiving records regarding an ethics waiver received by a senior DOJ attorney,²¹ American Oversight promptly posted the records to its website and published an analysis of what the records reflected about DOJ’s process for ethics waivers.²² As another example, American Oversight has a project called “Audit the Wall,” where the organization is gathering and analyzing information and commenting on public releases of information related to the administration’s proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border.²³

supra note 1; Osita Nwanevu, *Tom Price Reportedly Spent \$60,000 on Private Jets Last Week*, SLATE (Sept. 20, 2017, 10:30 AM), http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2017/09/20/tom_price_reportedly_spent_60_000_on_private_jets_last_week.html; Rachana Pradhan, *Democrats Seek Accounting of Price’s Use of Charter Planes*, POLITICO (Sept. 20, 2017, 10:46 AM), <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/20/tom-price-charter-planes-democrats-response-242926>; Peter Sullivan, *Top Dem Asks Watchdog to Look into Price Private Jet Travel*, THE HILL (Sept. 20, 2017, 10:31 AM), <http://thehill.com/homenews/house/351520-top-dem-asks-watchdog-to-look-into-price-private-jet-travel>; Diamond, *supra* note 2; Blake, *supra* note 3; Parti, *supra* note 4; Drexler, *supra* note 4.

¹⁷ 7 C.F.R. Part 1, Subpart A, Appendix A, Section 6(a)(1)(iii).

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ 7 C.F.R. Part 1, Subpart A, Appendix A, Section 6(a)(v)-(vi).

²⁰ American Oversight currently has over 11,500 page likes on Facebook, and over 35,000 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Sept. 25, 2017); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Sept. 25, 2017).

²¹ *DOJ Civil Division Response Noel Francisco Compliance*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>.

²² *Francisco & the Travel Ban: What We Learned from the DOJ Documents*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/francisco-the-travel-ban-what-we-learned-from-the-doj-documents>.

²³ *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, www.auditthewall.org.

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

Conclusion

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with USDA on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, have any questions, or foresee any problems in fully releasing the requested records, please contact Beth France at foia@americanoversight.org or (202) 869-5246. Also, if American Oversight's request for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Austin R. Evers". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

Austin R. Evers
Executive Director
American Oversight