

Probe finds multiple wrongdoings by ex-Farmington BLM head

Written by By Matthew Reichbach NM Political Report
Friday, 09 September 2016 01:59



A recently-released report by the U.S. Department of the Interior Office of Inspector General looked into the actions of Steve Henke from when he was in charge of the Bureau of Land Management office in Farmington.

The report says the investigation initially looked into the former Farmington district manager's move from manager of BLM's field office to being in charge of the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association. NMOGA represents the oil and gas industry in the state and lobbies BLM and state authorities on behalf of the industry.

The OIG, however, expanded the investigation into other areas, including "inappropriate acceptance of meals and other gifts from oil and gas industry representatives," "authorization of a commercial shooting range illegally construction on BLM land" and alleged misrepresentations and misuse of BLM resources in a land sale.

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Greenwire, a trade publication, first obtained and wrote about the report by the Interior Department OIG.

The OIG cleared Henke of any wrongdoing in the original allegations, but did “substantiate the other aforementioned allegations” and said he “made false statements to investigators and attempted to instruct our investigation.”

Though redacted in the report, Henke’s name is not difficult to find out. He is described as the person who retired from BLM in August 2010 and became the president of NMOGA.

Greenwire referred to the report as “long-buried.”

The publication also confirmed Henke was the subject of the investigation.

However, the dates of Henke’s employment at BLM outlined in the report and the date of his hiring as president of the oil and gas trade group pointed to Henke. So did an earlier Interior IG investigative report of Henke, as well as the Oct. 18, 2010, letter [former BLM Director Bob] Abbey wrote to acting Interior IG Mary Kendall requesting the second investigation.

A government source with knowledge about the investigation also confirmed that Henke is the subject of the IG’s report.

The publication of the report comes days after the former head of New Mexico’s Environment Department, Ryan Flynn, recently left his position to NMOGA, taking over for Henke.

Henke told *Greenwire* the years-long investigation was “political.”

Allegations

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Among the report's more serious findings were that Henke "improperly used his influence and position at BLM to initiate and advocate the sale of 160 acres of BLM land in Lindrith, NM."

According to the OIG's findings, "Henke may have misled BLM approving officials into believing that the land was isolated and inaccessible to the public, and that it would be in the best interest of the public if it were sold."

Investigators also found he had a friendship with the family of those who wanted to buy the land.

After Henke left, the BLM canceled the sale. Among the reasons for the cancellation was that the tract was not isolated—indeed, it could be accessed through a county road. Henke said he did not know it was a county road, though investigators found the appraisal of the land, required before any BLM land sale, documented that the road passed through the land.

Henke continued to be involved in the attempted sale past his retirement from BLM.

Another serious allegation from the report says that Henke "conspired with witnesses to mislead and obstruct our investigation, potentially violating Federal conspiracy and obstruction laws."

This alleged obstruction came as part of the aborted sale, including involving an incident where a witness said Henke instructed him to "get their stories straight" in case of an interview by the OIG.

Henke also "circumvented BLM policy" to provide approval for "a local firearms dealer and trainer" to operate a commercial shooting range on BLM property, according to investigators.

BLM does not allow operating shooting ranges on the agency's property because of potential

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lead contamination.

Still, a local gun store owner operated the range and taught concealed weapons permit training classes while Henke was in charge of the office.

Not only did the shooting range operate for years, the company that ran the illegal shooting range made a number of improvements to it.

The company that ran the shooting range also legally operated a sand and gravel pit on the land. They claimed the BLM gave them authorization to run the shooting range in the mid-2000s.

At one point, according to the investigation, BLM employees under Henke fought to shut down the shooting range. Henke instead overruled them and said it would continue to run until a final determination was made.

Henke even encouraged those who opposed him to speak to the OIG.

Allegations of accepting gifts

Federal employees have strict rules on gifts. They can only accept unsolicited gifts of \$20 or less. Gifts from any one source cannot exceed \$50 in a calendar year.

The investigation found under Henke, oil and gas companies would bring food to the Farmington office and introduced themselves to staffers as they waited in line to get the food. Henke told investigators this practice predated him and that he believed the food cost less than \$20 per employee.

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This isn't the first time an investigation put Henke in hot water when it came to accepting gifts. A report in 2010 obtained by the San Juan Citizens Alliance, an environmental group, found Henke accepted gifts from Williams Exploration and PProduction, including golf tickets.

Henke also was accused of soliciting "about \$8,000 in donations from the company for his son's youth baseball teams," according to the Associated Press.

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