



SUMMARY

STATE AIR TRAVEL: A Review of the Use of State Aircraft and the Purchase of Commercial Airline Tickets



INTRODUCTION

The President Pro Tempore of the South Carolina Senate requested that the Legislative Audit Council review the usage of state aircraft and the purchase of airline tickets.

Audits by the Legislative Audit Council are conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards as set forth by the Comptroller General of the United States.

FEBRUARY 2010

AUDIT RESULTS

ARE APPROPRIATE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES IN PLACE AT THE DIVISION OF AERONAUTICS, THE SOUTH CAROLINA LAW ENFORCEMENT DIVISION (SLED), AND THE DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES (DNR) REGARDING THE USE OF STATE AIRCRAFT?

Aeronautics, SLED, and DNR all have policies regarding the usage of state aircraft. From our review of flight information for FY 07-08 and FY 08-09, Aeronautics was the only agency with flight logs and manifest forms (with sworn statements regarding the nature of trips and how the trips were official business), as required by law. Aeronautics should revise its manifest form to include specific contact information for the person authorizing the flight, each passenger's affiliation, and typed or printed names of those authorizing flights.

DOES THE CURRENT PROVISIO REGARDING THE USE OF STATE AIRCRAFT ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY OF THE USE OF STATE AIRCRAFT?

The proviso addressing the use of state aircraft could be improved by requiring manifest forms for passenger flights be maintained and posted online — excepting strictly law enforcement flights. The proviso should require all agencies owning/operating state aircraft to update this information online at least monthly. Also, the proviso may need to be amended to exempt agencies from posting law enforcement flights online since it may endanger the law enforcement agents and pilots flying missions.

The proviso should also be amended to require all entities authorizing flights on Aeronautics' aircraft be billed for flight hours used, unless the General Assembly intends for certain officials to be exempt from paying.

HAVE THE REQUIRED FLIGHT LOGS AND DOCUMENTATION BEEN COMPLETED FOR FLIGHTS ON STATE-OWNED AIRCRAFT?

The Division of Aeronautics maintains flight logs and manifests for all flights on the state airplane. While both DNR and SLED had flight logs for all its flights for the two-year period, neither agency had implemented a manifest form with the sworn statement regarding the nature of the trip for passenger flights during that time period.

HAVE THE STATE-OWNED AIRCRAFT BEEN USED PROPERLY?

We reviewed approximately 1,600 flight logs of the Division of Aeronautics, SLED, and DNR. We determined that, overall, there were no significant problems with the use of state aircraft. For the period of FY 07-08 and FY 08-09, Aeronautics had one airplane, SLED had four helicopters, and DNR had three airplanes. In 2003-2004, DNR exchanged its only helicopter for SLED's only airplane.

Aeronautics

Aeronautics flew approximately 150 flights during FY 07-08 and FY 08-09. For flights where the nature of the trip was unclear, we obtained clarification and found the trips were for official state business, with the exception of two partisan trips made by the Governor. The Governor's Office stated that he attended both functions in his official capacity as Governor. One flight was to a reception/meeting with the South Carolina House Republican Caucus in August 2007 and the other was to a national Republican primary debate in January 2008. According to documentation provided by the Governor's Office, the Governor also attended a national Democratic primary debate, to which he drove.

FOR MORE
INFORMATION

Our full report, including comments from relevant agencies, is published on the Internet. Copies can also be obtained by contacting our office.

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SOUTH CAROLINA GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Legislative Audit Council
Independence, Reliability, Integrity

Thomas J. Bardin, Jr.
Director

1331 Elmwood Ave., Suite 315
Columbia, SC 29201
803.253.7612 (voice)
803.253.7639 (fax)

SLED

During our two-year review period, SLED flew approximately 930 law enforcement missions, including marijuana eradication, manhunts, escapes, search and rescues, and surveillance. We found documentation that SLED flew missions for 42 of 46 county sheriffs' departments during this time.

DNR

DNR flew approximately 500 flights during our review period. The majority of DNR's flights were for missions regarding natural resources, such as turtle surveys, night patrols, and search and rescues on the state's rivers and lakes. While most of DNR's flights were directly related to its mission, we found a small percentage which appeared to be for law enforcement unrelated to DNR. These flights supported SLED, the Department of Corrections, and other law enforcement agencies. DNR officials stated that DNR considers assisting other law enforcement agencies as its duty since all of its officers are also state law enforcement officers. We determined that it is practical for other state agencies, such as SLED, to request DNR's aircraft if the mission requires a fixed-wing aircraft; however, flying strictly law enforcement flights for local law enforcement agencies is probably best handled by SLED.

SLED and DNR should both implement the use of a manifest form for applicable passenger flights, which would include a sworn statement regarding the nature of the trip, as required by law. If deemed appropriate by the General Assembly, SLED and DNR should also implement a written memorandum of agreement regarding the use of aircraft owned by each agency.

ARE STATE OFFICIALS PURCHASING AIRLINE TICKETS IN ACCORDANCE WITH STATE LAW AND PROVISOS?

State proviso in each year's appropriations act prohibits state funds from being used to purchase first class airline tickets. Regulation 19-101.03 requires that travel by commercial airlines be in coach or tourist class, unless circumstances require otherwise. We found that there is some discrepancy between this proviso and regulation, which could allow business class travel at state expense.

Our review of 59 air travel vouchers (in-state, out-of-state, and foreign) processed by the Comptroller General's Office revealed that one agency, the Department of Commerce, had purchased business class tickets for the Governor, the Commerce Secretary, the Deputy Secretary, and, on occasion, a legislator. We did not find another agency in our sample purchasing first class or business class tickets.

To determine if agencies are aware of the restrictions regarding the purchase of commercial airline tickets, we contacted the seven agencies with the highest air travel expenditures. We found that six of the seven agencies had internal policies explicitly stating only economy or coach tickets could be purchased and all the agencies had internal procedures to check these purchases. The seventh, the Department of Revenue, was in the process of drafting a written policy on travel.

We recommend that the General Assembly amend the proviso regarding the purchase of first class airline tickets to prohibit the use of state funds to purchase any airline ticket excepting economy/coach/tourist. Also, if the General Assembly determines that certain state officials should be authorized to travel by commercial airlines in classes other than economy/coach/tourist, it should amend the proviso to specify those officials and circumstances.

HAVE PREVIOUS LAC RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING AIR TRAVEL BEEN IMPLEMENTED?

We have recommended contracting with air carriers for government discounts on airfares and/or having the Budget and Control Board develop a system to monitor and control state government travel expenditures over the years. We made similar recommendations in 1992, 2002, and 2005. We are recommending that the Budget and Control Board determine if contracting with air carriers could provide cost-effective government discounts on airfares.