

The Journal Gazette

DeLay defends search House panel tightens rules overseeing FAA

By Associated Press
July 16, 2003

New Federal Aviation Administration rules restricting access to information about an aircraft's whereabouts were spurred by Republican Rep. Tom DeLay's attempt to track down a Texas lawmaker who defied GOP redistricting plans.

The rules, announced at a House Transportation Committee hearing, would forbid FAA employees from revealing the whereabouts of a plane unless the request is for an official government purpose or for safety or efficiency reasons. A law enforcement agency can also make such a request as part of an investigation, under the new rules.

DeLay's office called the FAA on May 12 to locate the plane of Rep. Pete Laney, a Texas state legislator who joined other state Democrats in Ardmore, Okla. The lawmakers stayed in Oklahoma four days to prevent a vote in the Texas legislature on a GOP-favored redistricting bill.

A report from the inspector general of the Department of Transportation found that DeLay's request set off a search spread over eight hours and involved at least 13 FAA employees.

"I think there was some waste," Inspector General Kenneth Mead told the House committee Tuesday.

DeLay, who made fraud, waste and abuse a focus of his morning briefing with reporters Tuesday, defended his office's inquiry through the FAA, saying the agency used the Internet to answer his questions. But investigators said some of the information given to DeLay, the Texas Department of Public Safety and the Homeland Security Department came from FAA databases that are not publicly accessible.

DeLay, the House majority leader, said he has no second thoughts about his office's decision to call the FAA.

"Some of it may very well be available on the Internet, but I didn't hear that Mr. DeLay had a subscription to those services," said Rep. Jim Turner of Texas, ranking Democrat on the House committee that has responsibility for overseeing the Department of Homeland Security.

Under the new FAA rules, employees are not allowed to release information to outsiders from agency databases concerning a plane's location, altitude, flight plan, origin or destination.

Wisconsin Rep. James Oberstar, the ranking Democrat on the House Transportation Committee, said "under the new policy, the information (about Laney's plane) would not be provided" to DeLay.

House Transportation Committee Chairman Rep. Don Young, R- Alaska, said DeLay's inquiry with the FAA is "what I call constituent services."

The inspector general's report, which was released Friday, also said that some FAA controllers knew the plane was linked to the Texas political dispute. Mead said FAA controllers genuinely believed they were responding to a law enforcement request.

Democrats disagreed with DeLay's interpretation of the inspector general's report.

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