

Health Science

# First-class travel distinguishes Scott Pruitt's EPA tenure

By **Juliet Eilperin** and **Brady Dennis** February 11

Just days after helping orchestrate the United States' exit from a global climate accord last June, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt embarked on a whirlwind tour aimed at championing President Trump's agenda at home and abroad.

On Monday, June 5, accompanied by his personal security detail, Pruitt settled into his [\\$1,641.43 first-class seat](#) for a short flight from the District to New York City. His ticket cost more than six times that of the two media aides who came along and sat in coach, according to agency travel vouchers; the records do not show whether his security detail accompanied him at the front of the plane.

In Manhattan, Pruitt made two brief television appearances praising the White House's [decision to withdraw](#) from the 2015 Paris climate agreement, stayed with staff at an upscale hotel near Times Square and returned to Washington the next day.

That Wednesday, after traveling with Trump on Air Force One for an infrastructure event in Cincinnati, Pruitt and several staffers raced to New York on a military jet, at a cost of \$36,068.50, to catch a plane to Rome.

The transatlantic flight was part of a round-trip ticket for the administrator that cost \$7,003.52, according to [EPA records](#) — several times what was paid for other officials who went. The documents do not explain the discrepancy. In Rome, Pruitt and a coterie of aides and security personnel got private tours of the Vatican and met with papal officials, business executives and legal experts before heading briefly to a meeting of environmental ministers in Bologna. Pruitt departed the Group of Seven summit a day early, before negotiations had concluded, to attend a Cabinet meeting at which Trump's deputies [lauded the president's job performance](#).

In total, the taxpayer-funded travel for Pruitt and his top aides during that stretch in early June cost at least \$90,000, according to months of receipts obtained by the Environmental Integrity Project under the Freedom of Information Act. That figure does not account for the costs of Pruitt's round-the-clock security detail, which have not been disclosed.

In an interview Sunday, EPA spokeswoman Liz Bowman said all of Pruitt's travel expenses have been approved by federal ethics officials.

“He’s trying to further positive environmental outcomes and achieve tangible environmental results” through his travel, she said, adding that in the case of the New York trip, “He’s communicating the message about his agenda and the president’s agenda.”

On other domestic trips, Bowman added: “He’s hearing directly from people affected by EPA’s regulatory overreach.”

As he enters his second year in charge of the EPA, Pruitt is distinguishing himself from his predecessors in ways that go beyond policy differences. His travel practices — which tend to be secretive, costly and frequent — are integral to how he approaches his role.

Pruitt tends to bring a larger entourage of political advisers on his trips than past administrators. But while the aides usually fly coach, according to travel vouchers through August obtained by The Washington Post separately from the Environmental Integrity Project, he often sits in first or business class, which previous administrators typically eschewed.

Last year, Pruitt promoted U.S. natural-gas exports in Morocco, sat on a panel about the rule of law in Rome and met with his counterparts from major industrialized countries. This year, he plans to travel to Israel, Australia, Japan, Mexico and possibly Canada, according to officials familiar with his schedule. None of those visits have been officially announced.

Pruitt plans to meet with his foreign counterparts and U.S. and foreign business officials abroad, as well as tour energy facilities.

These overseas trips are largely untethered to the kind of multilateral environmental summits that dominated his predecessors’ schedules, and Pruitt rarely discloses where he plans to be.

In an interview Friday, Bowman said the agency doesn’t release Pruitt’s schedule in advance “due to security concerns” and because it could be a “distraction” from the trips. But she added that he has received government invitations for all his foreign trips.

“There’s just a lot of international cooperation that the head of any Cabinet-level agency wants to establish with his or her counterparts,” she said.

The agency records show that wherever Pruitt’s schedule takes him, he often flies first or business class, citing unspecified security concerns. The EPA’s assistant inspector general for investigations told The Post in September that Pruitt has gotten a higher number of threats than his recent predecessors.

[Federal regulations](#) state that government travelers are required to “exercise the same care in incurring expenses that a prudent person would exercise if traveling on personal business . . . and therefore, should consider the least expensive class of travel that meets their needs.” Agencies are allowed to authorize first-class travel in rare instances, such as a flight of 14 hours or more, a medical disability or when “exceptional security circumstances” mean “use of coach class accommodations would endanger your life or government property.”

Pruitt has used the security exception often during the past year.

In a two-day period last July, he spent \$4,443 for separate round-trips [to Birmingham](#) and [Atlanta](#) for visits that included a power plant and farm tour. On at least four occasions, he has spent between \$2,000 and \$2,600 on first-class airfare to official meetings or tours near Tulsa, where he lives. Frequently, he stayed in Tulsa for the weekend, records show, before returning to Washington.

Pruitt's other first-class trips include a \$4,680.04 itinerary to Salt Lake City, Minneapolis and Little Rock to promote the unraveling of a controversial Obama administration water regulation. Another multi-city ticket, which included stops in Colorado, Iowa, North Dakota and Texas, cost \$10,830, according to the vouchers, not including lodging and incidentals.

A separate batch of travel vouchers obtained by the Environmental Integrity Project shows that Pruitt flew coach multiple times from March to May 2017, but he also logged several more expensive trips during that period. On May 11, the administrator delivered the keynote address to the Heritage Foundation's Resource Bank Meeting in Colorado Springs; the conservative group covered his lodging, but the ticket cost \$2,903.56. A week later, he flew to Tulsa to tour the Brainerd Chemical Co. and stayed the weekend, for a flight cost of \$1,980.34.

While on the road, Pruitt often stays at high-end hotels, according to [travel records](#): the Kimpton in Salt Lake City, Le Meridien in Minneapolis, the Capital in Little Rock and the Michelangelo in New York.

In addition, he frequently opts to fly Delta Air Lines, even though the government has contracts with specific airlines on certain routes. Asked whether there is an additional expense associated with flying Delta when there is a comparable government contract flight, Bowman said, "EPA staff seek cost-efficient travel options at all times."

Such travel decisions, coupled with a tendency to not publicize out-of-town trips, have prompted criticism from Democratic lawmakers and environmental groups, who have questioned how much some of Pruitt's trips have to do with the EPA's mission.

"What did American taxpayers get for Pruitt visiting the Vatican and getting photographed with European agency heads?" said Eric Schaeffer, executive director of the Environmental Integrity Project, of last year's Italy trip. "This was all for show."

The group obtained Pruitt's travel vouchers through litigation and is suing for other travel-related documents, including speeches he has made in closed-door meetings with industry officials.

"It is acutely paranoid," Schaeffer said of the EPA's refusal to disclose Pruitt's whereabouts on any given day. "He's a public official. His schedule should be publicly known."

At the request of congressional Democrats, the EPA's Office of Inspector General is [conducting probes of Pruitt's travel last year](#) and the expansion of his security detail.

The decision to bring seven political aides and his security detail to Rome for two days before the G-7 summit significantly increased the cost of the Italy trip, which included just two career EPA officials. The Rome stop included a routine U.S. Embassy briefing, a meet-and-greet with business executives and a roundtable on the judiciary. But much of the two-day stop was devoted to [papal visits](#), including a meeting with [Archbishop Paul Gallagher](#) and private tours of the Vatican and St. Peter's Basilica.

Bowman declined to comment specifically on the topics discussed at the Vatican, but said in an email, "While in Italy, Administrator Pruitt discussed how the U.S. is leading the world in environmental achievements to remediate toxic land, reduce air pollution, improve water infrastructure, and ensure access to clean drinking water." She added: "These discussions were broad, and very well-received."

In December, Pruitt [journeyed to Morocco](#), where he touted America's natural-gas exports and discussed a series of policy collaborations between the two countries.

Pruitt's two immediate predecessors, Lisa Jackson and Gina McCarthy, also traveled repeatedly to foreign summits and other events. Jackson traveled abroad four times a year while on the job, including to the Group of Eight's environment ministers' meeting in Siracusa, Italy; the U.N. climate talks in Copenhagen; the inauguration of Indonesia's president; and the Netherlands as part of [a trip focused on sea-level rise](#). The entire delegation flew coach to the Netherlands, and invited the media to come along.

McCarthy traveled overseas between four and seven times a year, including to multilateral meetings; a G.E. oil and gas conference in Florence, Italy; the Costa Rican president's inauguration; and to the closing ceremony of the Rio Olympics.

Unlike with Pruitt, the EPA typically announced McCarthy's general itinerary and the purpose of her trips in advance.

"McCarthy will arrive in China beginning on Monday, December 9, to discuss US-China cooperation on air quality, climate pollution and environmental issues. She will travel to Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong during her four-day visit," read a 2013 agency news release posted days before her visit.

By contrast, Pruitt's EPA routinely gives the public no such notice, either domestically or internationally.

Last week, for instance, Pruitt surfaced in Florida, to the surprise of reporters who cover the EPA and even media outlets in the state. An official said the agency notified some local and national outlets.

The EPA has also declined at times to confirm in advance Pruitt's speaking engagements to various industry and political groups.

Several foreign officials, when contacted by The Post, deferred questions about Pruitt's upcoming visits either to the U.S. Embassy or the EPA.

In the coming weeks, Pruitt will embark on a series of trips, some of which had been postponed due to external circumstances. A brief government shutdown in January forced Pruitt to cancel a trip to Japan and Israel, for example, and he will travel this month instead.

Japanese Embassy spokeswoman Rieko Suzuki said in an email that Pruitt had raised the idea of visiting with Japanese Environment Minister Masaharu Nakagawa, and her country was working on finalizing the details. “Since EPA Administrator Pruitt expressed his intention of visiting Japan and meeting Minister Nakagawa,” she wrote, “the Ministry of Environment of Japan has been trying to arrange a bilateral meeting.”

A spokesman for a low-emissions coal thermal plant located in the suburbs of Tokyo, run by the electric utility firm J-Power, confirmed Pruitt was scheduled to visit the facility. J Power spokesman Shingen Tsuneoka said that the plant emits “almost no” nitrogen oxide and sulfur dioxide, two major air pollutants released by burning coal.

Bowman said Pruitt is headed to Japan “to strengthen existing areas of environmental cooperation, learn how Japan is responding to emerging energy challenges, and share successful approaches to innovative environmental technologies.” The administrator also will participate in a business roundtable with the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan, and visit the Yokohama Hydrogen Supply Chain Demonstration, she added.

In Israel, Bowman said, Pruitt will “visit a water recycling plant, hear from Israeli water technology companies about their successes in wastewater recycling for irrigation, visit a waste processing facility, tour a toxic land remediation site” and take part in a clean energy roundtable.

Next month, Pruitt is tentatively planning a one-day trip to Mexico to meet with Environment and Natural Resources Secretary Rafael Pacchiano Alamán, she said. That trip also had been postponed, according to travel vouchers.

Pruitt had intended to journey to Australia last year, according to EPA officials, where he was set to meet with officials from Peabody, the world’s largest private-sector coal company, as well as Melbourne-based energy giant BHP. The visit was to include a boat trip, according to an official, but was canceled because Pruitt had to work on the federal response to Hurricane Harvey.

This week, Pruitt is expected to travel to New Hampshire on a trip that will include a meeting with the governor, a visit to a local paper company and a tour of a Superfund site. The EPA has not publicized the trip.

*Yuki Oda in Tokyo and Ruth Eglash in Jerusalem contributed to this report. Correction: This article originally stated that a set of travel vouchers from March to May 2017 was obtained by the Environmental Working Group. The vouchers were obtained by the Environmental Integrity Project.*

 **2839 Comments**

Juliet Eilperin is The Washington Post's senior national affairs correspondent, covering how the new administration is transforming a range of U.S. policies and the federal government itself. She is the author of two books — one on sharks and another on Congress, not to be confused with each other — and has worked for The Post since 1998.

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Brady Dennis is a national reporter for The Washington Post, focusing on the environment and public health issues. He previously spent years covering the nation's economy. Dennis was a finalist for the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for a series of explanatory stories about the global financial crisis. 🐦 Follow @brady\_dennis