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Pombo's power grows — and so do the scandals

BY MATT WEISER

Richard Pombo had a relatively trouble-free career in Congress until 2003, when he became chairman of the powerful House Resources Committee. Since then, he has been linked to a number of scandals.

"The problem with Pombo is that there are so many things," says Melanie Sloan, executive director of Citizens for Ethics in Washington, a nonprofit political watchdog group. "There's just issue after issue that really brings his ethics into question, and he will never admit to making a mistake. He's part of the typical Republican leadership that thinks they're beyond question, that thinks it's OK because they do it."

Here's a rundown of the congressman's current travails:

- House travel records show that Pombo's committee staff enjoyed a travel bonanza in 2003 and 2004, going on industry-funded junkets worth \$152,000. That's more than twice as much as was spent on staffers employed in the previous two years by the former Resources Committee chairman, Rep. James Hansen, R-Utah.

These trips took Pombo staffers all over the nation and to foreign countries, including Taiwan, Canada and England. Sponsors included the American Gas Association, the

Family Farm Alliance, Shell Oil, British Petroleum, the National Indian Gaming Association, Plum Creek Timber Co., and the American Petroleum Institute. Ostensibly, the trips were for "educational" purposes, but committee staffers sometimes traveled in groups, or returned to the same place year after year. Some trips included gifts such as monogrammed jackets, and perks like marlin fishing and target shooting.

- Pombo is also wrapped up in a larger travel scandal that involves two longtime friends: House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Tex., and lobbyist Jack Abramoff.

Lobbyists are not allowed to pay directly for congressional travel, but news reports suggest Abramoff paid to send a number of elected officials, including DeLay, to the Mariana Islands, a U.S. territory. Abramoff was working for the Marianas government to protect it from U.S. labor laws; garment manufacturers can now produce clothing in the Mariana Islands under sweatshop conditions and legally label it "Made in USA."

Pombo's committee has jurisdiction to investigate the Marianas scandal, and other House members have asked him to do so, but so far he has refused. Instead, it looks like he's working to protect his old friends. Abramoff gave Pombo's political action committee, Rich PAC, \$5,000,

last year, and the PAC then contributed the same amount to DeLay's legal defense fund. Rich PAC also received donations totaling \$9,500 from another member of Abramoff's firm, and more money from interests in the Marianas, including the current governor.

The Marianas trips were among many that DeLay allegedly took on the lobbyist's dime. As a result, he was at risk of losing his leadership position, until House Republicans changed House ethics rules last year to protect him. Pombo played a key role in the rule change.

Pombo's committee spent more than \$105,000 on mailings in his first two years as chairman. That's 25 times more than his predecessor, and more than three times greater than the next highest spending committee. In response, the House adopted a new rule to limit mailings to \$5,000 per session.

Critics say some mailings broke other House rules by using public funds to promote President Bush and fellow committee members. Perhaps the most glaring example is the 166,000 fliers sent to Minnesota and Wisconsin residents, weeks before the November election, touting Bush's push to keep Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks open to snowmobiling. The group Public Citizen filed a complaint against Pombo with the House Franking

Commission. Pombo spokesman Brian Kennedy told the Billings Gazette: "If anything, the chairman believes we should be doing more of this."

- Prior to the Nov. 4, 2004, election, Pombo gave his entire committee staff a month of paid leave, well beyond their usual two to three weeks of vacation time. The government reimbursed some for their travel during this time. Critics said the leave was designed so the staffers could work on election campaigns at government expense, which is illegal. Pombo and his staff have said there was nothing improper about the time off or the reimbursements.

- Pombo paid his wife and his brother, Randall, \$465,000 out of his campaign treasury between 2001 and 2004 for work described as "bookkeeping," "clerical" and "fundraising." While it is not unusual for politicians to employ family members, critics say the amount of money involved in Pombo's case is staggering, amounting to 25 percent of all the money Pombo's campaign raised during one period. In the first quarter of this year, he paid them an additional \$18,000, amounting, again, to more than one-fourth of all income for the period.

- In October 2004, Interior Secretary Gale Norton received a letter bearing Pombo's signature, urging her to suspend new guidelines meant to protect migratory birds from the whirling blades of wind-energy turbines. The L.A. Times reported that Resources Committee staff confronted Fish and Wildlife Service officials about the guidelines a few days later, specifically mentioning actions by the agency's Sacramento office in the Altamont Pass area, a major wind-energy area. In neither case did the committee disclose that Pombo's parents have earned hundreds of thousands of dollars leasing land in the area to wind-energy companies, accord-

ing to media accounts. Pombo later told the Times he didn't know about the letter, and his staff said they sent it out without his knowledge.

- Pombo has been a vocal critic of the government's use of eminent domain to take possession of private land. But he has pushed for years to build a new federal highway between Interstate 5 in the San Joaquin Valley and Highway 130 in the Bay Area. Depending on the route, the highway could pass through lands sought for wilderness preservation, and require the government to condemn private farm and ranchland. It could also enrich the Pombo family, whose ranchland fronts Interstate 580, just north of the new highway's proposed link with Interstate 5.