

**Publication:**American Press;**Date:**Jun 5, 2005;**Section:**Editorial;**Page Number:**8

# AMERICAN PRESS EDITORIAL

## Insurance agency's travel excessive

State Insurance Commissioner Robert Wooley just doesn't get it.

First, there's the fiasco over his purchase of two luxury vehicles with public money, including the Harley-Davidson special-edition pickup truck with flames painted on the sides.

Wooley returned the vehicles and apologized, but only after a public outcry and state legislators moved to changed the law regarding these kind of vehicles.

Now we have learned that the insurance department's travel budget last year totaled nearly \$600,000.

By comparison, state insurance departments in Alabama and Mississippi spent \$90,000 and \$127,000, respectively, on travel last year.

Louisiana's insurance department has sent its employees to all kinds of national conferences.

Jim Donelon, executive counsel for the Department of Insurance, told WWL-TV in New Orleans that the trips are worth the money spent because the department employees get to network and learn new lessons at the conferences.

However, Jim Brandt, executive director of the Public Affairs Research Council, called the spending "excessive" and "indefensible."

Deputy Commissioner Chad Brown told the Times-Picayune of New Orleans last month that the travel was needed for the department to fix its reputation nationwide among insurance companies.

The department's image has suffered because the last three insurance commissioners went to jail on criminal charges, according to Brown.

"We have an image problem in the Department of Insurance," Brown told the Times-Picayune.

We cannot agree more, but in this case the problem lies with a department that doesn't seem to care how it spends taxpayers' money. If the department's leaders are so worried about the agency's reputation, they need to look in the mirror.

It's their actions that are making this department the joke around the state.

Wooley needs to show some leadership here and get this department back on track instead of making the news with dumb moves.

The commissioner can take a lesson from something former Attorney General Richard Ieyoub once said.

Ieyoub came under fire in 1998 for questionable expenses in his campaign finance report which included home furnishings bought for his residence.

Even though he insisted everything he had done was legal, Ieyoub said he had learned a lesson from the experience.

"... You have to be careful how monies are spent — even if it's legal, it might not be perceived that way," he said.

The public's perception is something every elected official should consider in every one of their actions.

Wooley has more amends to make if he's going to improve the Department of Insurance's image within Louisiana.