

Energy and Environment

EPA spending almost \$25,000 to install a secure phone booth for Scott Pruitt

By **Brady Dennis** September 26, 2017

The Environmental Protection Agency is spending nearly \$25,000 to construct a secure, soundproof communications booth in the office of Administrator Scott Pruitt, according to government contracting records.

The agency signed a \$24,570 contract earlier this summer with Acoustical Solutions, a Richmond-based company, for a “privacy booth for the administrator.” The company sells and installs an array of sound-dampening and privacy products, from ceiling baffles to full-scale enclosures like the one purchased by the EPA. The project’s scheduled completion date is Oct. 9, according to the contract.

Typically, such soundproof booths are used to conduct hearing tests. But the EPA sought a customized version — one that eventually would cost several times more than a typical model — that Pruitt can use to communicate privately.

“They had a lot of modifications,” said Steve Snider, an acoustic sales consultant with the company, who worked with the agency on its order earlier this summer. “Their main goal was they wanted essentially a secure phone booth that couldn’t be breached from a data point of view or from someone standing outside eavesdropping.”

No previous EPA administrators had such a setup.

“What you are referring to is a secured communication area in the administrator’s office so secured calls can be received and made,” EPA spokeswoman Liz Bowman said in a statement. “Federal agencies need to have one of these so that secured communications, not subject to hacking from the outside, can be held. It’s called a Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility (SCIF). This is something which a number, if not all, Cabinet offices have and EPA needs to have updated.”

But according to former agency employees, the EPA has long maintained a SCIF on a separate floor from the administrator’s office, where officials with proper clearances can go to share information classified as secret. The agency did not specify what aspects of that facility were outdated, or whether the unit inside Pruitt’s office would meet the physical and technical specifications a SCIF generally is required to have.

In recent months, Pruitt and his top deputies have taken other steps aimed at heightening security. Some EPA employees have been asked to surrender their cellphones and other digital devices before meetings in the administrator's office, in much the same way visitors do when visiting the president in the Oval Office.

A senior administration official, who asked not to be identified to discuss internal procedures, said that practice was instituted to ensure that employees are focused on the discussion during meetings. However, Bowman said that "if anyone was asked not to bring [phones], it was merely a professional courtesy — it is by no means a policy or directive."

Pruitt also has shied away from using email at EPA, often preferring to deliver instructions verbally and hold face-to-face meetings. The shift stems in part from public disclosure by the New York Times in 2014 — following an open-records request of emails — of how Pruitt and other attorneys general had worked closely with the oil and gas industry to oppose Obama administration environmental safeguards.

Thousands more pages of emails from his time as Oklahoma's attorney general, released earlier this year after the Center for Media and Democracy sued for them to be made public, detailed an often-chummy relationship between Pruitt's office and Devon Energy, a major oil and gas exploration and production company based in Oklahoma City.

In addition, Pruitt has largely avoided the agency's decades-long practice of publicly posting the administrator's appointment calendars. Only last week were details on months worth of meetings released after media outlets filed repeated Freedom of Information Act requests for that information; they showed he has met regularly with corporate executives from the automobile, mining and fossil fuel industries — in several instances shortly before making decisions favorable to those interest groups.

Pruitt, who has become a polarizing and high-profile figure as he seeks to roll back Obama-era policies and shrink the EPA's footprint, has essentially tripled the personal security detail that served past administrators. The detail now includes about 18 people to cover round-the-clock needs and his frequent travel schedule. Such 24/7 coverage has prompted officials to rotate in special agents from around the country who otherwise would be investigating environmental crimes.

Acoustical Solutions has done work for various government entities over the years, including building soundproof wall barriers at the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board and installing sound-dampening wall and ceiling panels at the State Department, Agriculture Department and other agencies. Earlier this year, the Treasury Department turned to the company to provide a "sound enclosure" at the U.S. Mint in Denver.

Snider said the company also has installed numerous "audiometric" booths in other government agencies, such as Veterans Affairs, but those almost always are used for hearing tests. The EPA's request was something different altogether, he said.

"This is a first," he said. "They are definitely using this booth in a way that wasn't necessarily intended. ... [But] for the criteria they had, it fit this product."

Juliet Eilperin contributed to this report.