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## NASA inspector general faults space agency boss

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NASA's chief found himself mired in another controversy Monday, this time for making "inappropriate" contact with an oil company while considering an alternative fuel project.

The space agency's inspector general reported that a 10-minute phone conversation last April between Administrator Charles Bolden Jr. and a senior Marathon Oil Corp. official was inconsistent with the ethics pledge he signed upon taking office last year. It also raised concerns about an appearance of a conflict of interest, the inspector general said.

Bolden — a two-time space shuttle commander and retired Marine general — is a former board member of Marathon and remains a major stockholder. At the time of the phone call in question, his stock was worth between \$500,000 and \$1 million.

In an 11-page report, NASA Inspector General Paul Martin concluded that Bolden's contact with Marathon did not violate federal laws or ethics regulations. But the action unsettled some within NASA and was the latest in a series of embarrassing missteps by Bolden.

Over the summer, Bolden said in an interview with Middle Eastern news network Al-Jazeera that one of NASA's main tasks was to reach out to the Muslim world and help Muslims feel good about their historical contributions to science. NASA and the White House spent a good part of July trying to defend and explain Bolden's comments.

And earlier in the year, Bolden upset many of NASA's work force with the abrupt way he rolled out President Obama's new vision for human space exploration after the shuttle program ends. The new space plan kills the moon-bound Constellation program that the agency had been working on and redirects future astronauts to asteroids and Mars — with heavy emphasis on commercially built spaceships.

Bolden subsequently apologized for how he handled the matter, given all the anxieties about impending job losses throughout the shuttle program.

As for the latest flap, Bolden acknowledged to the inspector general that he made a mistake when he talked to Marathon about the alternative fuel project, calling it "inappropriate." He has since recused himself from the project — which involves producing fuel offshore using wastewater and algae — and has taken refresher ethics training.

"We find these actions appropriate and sufficient to address our findings," the inspector general's report said.

The algae-based fuel research project, called Omega, is run by NASA's Ames Research Center in Mountain View, Calif. Bolden wanted the technical opinion of someone at Marathon, while he was considering a proposed agreement between NASA and the Navy, the inspector general said.

The inspector general said Bolden pledged upon taking office in July 2009 to refrain for two years from having private

communications with Marathon or any other of his former employers, regarding NASA business.

One of those interviewed for the inspector general's report was the director of Ames, Simon "Pete" Worden.

In an e-mail exchange in May with NASA deputy administrator Lori Garver, Worden wrote: "In the interest of open government and transparency, I think my folks are entitled to know who talked to Charlie and the basis of their criticism so we can respond."

Worden continued: "This is frankly the worst of NASA and I don't like it. It is 'good ole boy' networks at its worst and not worthy of NASA and this Administration."

Bolden said he readily accepts the inspector general's findings.

"My intention was to gather an outside perspective about a potential agency research project," Bolden, 64, said in a statement issued by NASA on Monday. "I should have explored the implications of my inquiry prior to acting."

The Omega project continues, Bolden noted, "and its future development will be decided solely on its technical merits."

NASA has committed to funding the project for up to \$10 million over the next two years.