

Lawmakers spending the week in Maine, Canada

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A jogger runs near Bug Light in South Portland, Maine on June 7, 2022. Photo by Robert F. Bukaty, AP Photo

What do Ireland, Israel, Maine and Canada have in common?

They're among the locations to which California lawmakers have embarked on special interest-funded trips during their month-long summer recess, which comes to an end Monday when they return to Sacramento for the frenzied final month of the legislative session.

The latest junket began Sunday, when a bipartisan group of five state lawmakers — led by Democratic state Sen. Ben Allen of Santa Monica — headed to Portland, Maine for the first leg of a trip that its organizer, the nonprofit California Foundation on the Environment and the Economy, is billing as a “research tour” of the “circular economy,” which includes recycling and composting. The second leg begins Wednesday in Montreal, Quebec.

Also on the trip: Democratic state Sens. Susan Talamantes Eggman of Stockton, Nancy Skinner of Berkeley and Bob Wieckowski of Fremont; Republican Assemblymember Heath Flora of Modesto; State Treasurer Fiona Ma; and Samuel Assefa, director of the Governor's

Office of Planning and Research, according to documents shared with me by the foundation.

Representatives from the foundation's board of directors — who include business, labor, environmental, utility and local government leaders — are also set to attend. Participating organizations include Google, the League of California Cities, the Rural County Representatives of California, the Alliance for Automotive Innovation, the National Stewardship Action Council and the California Product Stewardship Council.

An itinerary of the trip, which is slated to last through Friday, lists meetings with political leaders in Maine and Quebec, as well as tours of an electric vehicle battery recycling facility, a glass bottle manufacturing plant, a lobster processing and shell reuse facility, a recycling and waste-to-energy plant and a food waste collector and composter.

- **Allen said in a statement:** “Like California, the state of Maine and the nation of Canada are pioneers in the ‘circular economy.’ By sharing ideas with our peers, we can strengthen the reach of California’s environmental stewardship while promoting new economic opportunities. These exchanges will inform the implementation of innovative policies and programs we are pursuing in our state.”
- **He added:** “This timely visit will highlight new approaches to old problems. Whether it’s seeing the progress in electric vehicle battery recycling, the expansion of curbside composting programs, or better methods for collecting and recycling bottles and cans, these informative exchanges will help us reach ambitious pollution reduction goals on broader scales.”

Allen was a key player in high-stakes negotiations with environmental advocates and industry groups last month to push through legislation designed to ensure all single-use plastic packaging is recyclable or compostable by 2032, while raising \$5 billion from the plastics industry over 10 years to help slash pollution. After the deal, which Gov. Gavin Newsom described as “nation-leading,” proponents withdrew a November ballot measure that aimed to achieve many of the same goals.

The Maine and Canada trip is the latest example of lawmakers embarking on junkets funded not by taxpayers, but by special interests that lobby the Legislature — typically a combination of labor unions, corporations and trade associations.

- This summer, the California Legislative Irish Caucus took a trip to Ireland funded in part by the pharmaceutical industry, while 15 Democratic lawmakers went to Israel on a trip primarily funded by the Koret Foundation and the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles.
- The California Foundation on the Environment and the Economy sponsored a trip to Portugal last year and to Iceland this spring.

- **PJ Johnston, a spokesperson for the foundation, told me in a statement:**
Our “mission is to create an environment that engenders a free and open, yet informed, exploration of facts, views and proposals among experts and leaders from the various sides of public policy discussions. We do not address specific legislation. Rather, our research tours and in-state forums concentrate on the broad public policy complexities of statewide issues, and on best practices from around the world. We pride ourselves on being nonpartisan and on operating at no cost to taxpayers.”
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