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Simhon may have to wait up to three years to head JNF

By Ofra Edelman

Attorney General Yehuda Weinstein is considering a request to force Shalom Simhon to wait up to three years between leaving the Agriculture Ministry and heading the Jewish National Fund because of a potential conflict of interest between the two positions.

The Ometz government watchdog group is requesting an enforced "cooling-off period" of between one and three years, because Simhon has authority over the JNF in his capacity as agriculture minister.

"This is enough to aggravate the fear of an appearance of abuse of power or conflict of interest," Ometz said in a letter to Weinstein sent two weeks ago. Deputy Attorney General Orit Koren has informed Ometz that its request is being examined.

The JNF carries out inspections on behalf of the Agriculture Ministry, develops agricultural infrastructure with ministry funds and, along with the ministry, sits on the council that determines the policy of the Israel Lands Administration.

In its letter, Ometz cited a 2009 ruling by the Jerusalem District Court, which found that Agriculture Ministry director general Yael Shaltieli would have to undergo a cooling-off period before taking up her post as director general of the JNF. The group said the same logic should apply to Simhon, who it said influenced JNF matters more than Shaltieli.

The group also said if Simhon were to take up the position of JNF head now, the appointment would contravene the law governing parliamentary immunity as well as the attorney general's own guidelines.

Simhon has also been cited in a recent state comptroller's report for suspected conflict of interest, Ometz noted. Simhon's office said the minister would abide by whatever Weinstein decides.

Mazal Mualem contributed to this report.