

Report: IGs face budget, staffing problems

By GREGG CARLSTROM
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The State Department, with a \$35 billion budget and operations in nearly every country, has the second-smallest department-level inspector general's office, with 185 full-time employees.

The Defense Department's IG doesn't have its own lawyers, and relies on the department's general counsel for legal advice.

And the inspector general at the Consumer Product Safety Commission needs permission from the agency before posting reports online.

Those limitations are highlighted in a new report from the Project on Government Oversight (POGO), an independent, nonprofit watchdog group. The report calls for changes to staffing and budgeting at IG offices, and says IGs have lost some of their independence.

"There's been a push away from the '70s-era concept of [inspectors general as] 'junkyard dogs,'" said Danielle Brian, POGO's executive director. "Now IGs are focusing on promoting 'best practices' and being part of the management team."

Budgeting and staffing have become ongoing problems for many IGs, particularly those who are not appointed by the president. Their parent agencies often do not submit inspector general budget requests as separate line items. So IGs are forced to bargain with their agency heads for additional funding.

"We know of one inspector general who went to his agency head



ROB CURTIS/FEDERALTIMES

The Project on Government Oversight's Danielle Brian says inspectors general have lost some of their independence.

and asked for more staff," said Beverley Lumpkin, a POGO investigator. "And the response was, 'Why should I give you more staff that you'll use to investigate me?'"

Many inspectors general also seem increasingly unqualified for their work: Less than 20 percent of Bush administration IGs had previous audit experience, compared with 60 percent who had political experience. The report calls for tougher selection standards, and for creating an independent IG council that maintains a roster of employees to help staff smaller IG offices.

Even agency Web sites have become an issue: Several IGs need permission before posting anything online, and a few agencies don't link to their IG Web sites from their home pages.

The group praised a bill introduced last November by Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., for addressing many of these issues. The bill — which has 11 co-sponsors of both parties — was reported to the full Senate last week.

It would: establish an IG council that merges two existing councils; require all agencies to submit IG budget requests as separate line items; and improve accessibility of IG Web sites. ■

Lawmakers say budget cuts are threat to national forests, parks

By TIM KAUFFMAN
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Expected budget cuts next year in federal land management programs are likely to exacerbate maintenance backlogs, environmental hazards and neglect of natural resources, lawmakers said last week.

Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz., complained that proposed 2009 budget cuts for the Interior Department's National Park Service and Bureau of Land Management and the Agriculture Department's Forest Service continue a pattern of underfunding that threatens the health of national forests, undermines forest-fighting capabilities and neglects national parks.

He spoke at a Feb. 27 hearing before the House Natural Resources subcommittee on national parks, forests and public lands, which he chairs.

The Forest Service is in line for the biggest cut, 8 percent from the fiscal 2008 approved budget. The cut is even larger when spending related to fighting fires is omitted. The budget for fighting fires has ballooned in recent years and now consumes nearly half of the agency's discretionary budget, forcing cuts in other programs. The program providing technical and financial assistance to state and private forests would be hardest hit, with a proposed 58 percent budget cut.

"The cost of fire suppression has just gone through the roof," Forest Service Chief Abigail Kimbell said. "It comes out of a flat budget and leaves a lot less for other programs."

Many of the proposed cuts appear shortsighted, given the growing problems facing forests due to climate change and water shortages, lawmakers said. Even though forest fires have grown larger and more powerful due to persistent drought and more dry brush and dead trees, the budget proposes a 13 percent decrease in fire preparedness.

An infestation of pine beetles is devastating trees from coast to coast, but the 2009 budget will allow for treating 22,000 acres of forests. That's down from 40,000 acres to be treated this year, Kimbell said.

"I have watched this beautiful, incredible system just go to the dogs," said Rep. Jay Inslee, D-Wash. "I don't know how you possibly deal with these issues with a cut like that."

The Bureau of Land Management is poised for a 3 percent budget cut. Range, wildlife, fisheries, cultural and recreation management programs all are slated for cuts.



TOM BROWN/FEDERALTIMES

Forest Service Chief Abigail Kimbell says the rising cost of fighting fires has cut into funding for other programs.

Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah, questioned BLM Deputy Director Henri Bisson about the agency's plan to shift 18 employees to a policymaking office in Washington.

Bisson said the proposal would simply shift existing employees from the headquarters public affairs office to the National Landscape Conservation System, where they would be a better fit. But Bishop said the office, created in 2000, seems to replicate functions that already are being provided by other agency employees.

"This is an organization that on a flow chart of an agency sticks out like a sore thumb," he said. "It was a problem when it was initiated, and it's a problem now. The fact that it is growing ... does not help the situation."

The National Park Service is in line for a 7 percent budget hike, although Grijalva said the proposed increase for park operations comes at the expense of other needy areas.

The budget proposes cutting the construction and maintenance account by almost a third, to \$90.1 million. The agency's maintenance backlog tops \$8 billion, almost twice what it was when President Bush took office, according to the National Parks Conservation Association. ■

Homeland Security scales back plan for 'virtual fence'

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The Homeland Security Department is scaling back plans to build a high-tech "virtual fence" along the Mexican border, after uncovering serious problems with the first phase of the project.

A 28-mile stretch of the fence, called "Project 28," was built along the border near Tucson, Ariz. DHS accepted the project from the contractor, Boeing, last week. But officials with Customs and Border Protection acknowledged at a Feb. 27

congressional hearing that Project 28 is not fully operational.

Jayson Ahern, CBP deputy commissioner, told the House Homeland Security subcommittee on border security that Project 28 is supposed to be a "demonstration."

"Clearly the opportunity was for the contractors to demonstrate their core capabilities for this project," Ahern said. "We certainly could have waited, and took a longer-term approach, but we wanted to get it out there to see how it would work."

But Rep. Loretta Sanchez, D-Calif., the subcommittee chair-

woman, said the project was supposed to be fully operational last June. "Now, after we've accepted Project 28, months late, we're being told it was never supposed to be fully operational, despite many claims to the contrary by the department?" she asked.

Richard Stana, Government Accountability Office director of homeland security issues, said CBP's attitude toward the project changed as Boeing missed deadlines.

"In September, after they missed the deadline, some of the excitement turned to skepticism, and by

February, after the Border Patrol was working with Boeing to overcome some of the initial problems, they became resigned to [the problems with] this," Stana said.

The virtual fence — called the Secure Border Initiative — relies on a high-tech network of cameras, radars and telecommunications equipment to monitor sparsely populated desert areas along the border. Computer software notifies CBP officers — linked by satellite phones — of people trying to sneak across. Boeing says it has already helped CBP capture more than

2,000 illegal immigrants.

SBI will supplement the more than 600 miles of physical fencing that DHS plans to build along the border.

Officials say the first phase of SBI, about 100 miles of "fence" in Arizona and Texas, will be complete by the end of 2011, instead of 2008 as originally planned. Boeing's contract with the agency ends in 2009, but CBP has the option to renew.

Legislators are skeptical about the future of the project and Boeing's work; several faulted the company for not consulting CBP on SBI's design.

"You refer to this [Project 28] as a proof of concept," said Rep. Christopher Carney, D-Pa. "But what concept are we proving?" ■