

White House releases plan to reform and reorganize executive branch agencies

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On June 21, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) released a plan to reform and reorganize executive branch departments and agencies of the federal government, following President Donald Trump's March 13, 2017, executive order (E.O. 13781) intended to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability of the executive branch. The plan outlines over eighty recommendations for structural realignment across the executive branch, including changes to geoscience-related federal agencies. At a House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform hearing on June 27, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) deputy director for management, Margaret Weichert, explained that the plan is a blueprint for public debate and congressional consideration. Ms. Weichert suggested that the proposed changes would take three to five years to execute, and that OMB would work with Congress to determine and approve aspects of the proposal that require Congressional authority.

National Science Foundation (NSF)

The plan proposes authorizing NSF – which currently administers the Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP) – to administer smaller federal graduate research fellowships awarded by other agencies. In order to reduce duplicative administrative efforts and yield financial savings, the plan suggests that NSF would coordinate the fellowship application, selection, and award processes for other agencies, and those other agencies would reimburse NSF for this work. In addition, the administration proposes the introduction of two “Convergence Accelerators” that will facilitate the agency's funding of interdisciplinary research focusing on “Harnessing the Data Revolution” and the “Future of Work at the Human-Technology Frontier.”

Department of Energy (DOE)

The proposal would consolidate DOE's applied energy research programs, including the Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy (ARPA-E), into a single, new Office of Energy Innovation to maximize the benefits of energy research and development (R&D) and enable quicker adoption. DOE's current R&D facilities are organized by major energy technology or primary energy source, such as nuclear, fossil, and renewables. The plan would also establish a parallel Office of Energy Resources and Economic Strategy to focus on strategic delivery of solutions that support U.S. energy dominance or access to resources and infrastructure. In addition, the reorganization plan states that DOE's Office of Science is evaluating several proposals to merge and consolidate field and headquarters activities to improve efficiency and reduce costs; those proposals include merging geographically associated site offices, reorganizing the Integrated Service Centers, realigning safety and technical services, streamlining the Office of Science organization, and reducing staff and administration support costs.

National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)

The proposal would establish an accelerated process for determining whether one or more of NASA's geographically dispersed centers should be converted to, or host, a Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC). According to the document, FFRDCs can potentially allow more flexibility for the agency to rapidly respond to its changing needs and retain its scientific and technical expertise. Currently, nine of the ten NASA centers are government owned and operated, except for the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, which is operated by the California Institute of Technology as an FFRDC. A 2004 Presidential Commission recommended that NASA Centers be reconfigured as FFRDCs to enable greater innovation, work more effectively with the private sector, and stimulate economic development.

Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)

Similar to proposals from Chairman Bill Shuster (R-PA-9) of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, the administration's plan would move the USACE Civil Works program from the Department of Defense (DOD) to the Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Department of the Interior (DOI), in order to consolidate and align USACE Civil Works missions with these two agencies. Relating to the missions of DOT and DOI, the Civil Works program has three primary missions: commercial navigation, flood and storm damage reduction, and aquatic ecosystem restoration. Flood and storm damage reduction, aquatic ecosystem restoration, and regulatory activities would be integrated and aligned with complementary DOI programs.

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

The proposal would consolidate portions of DOI's Central Hazardous Materials Program and the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Hazardous Materials Management program into the EPA Superfund program. The EPA would be responsible for environmental cleanup at mining sites on all federal land, as directed under the Comprehensive Environmental Response Compensation & Liability Act (CERCLA). The agency would also be responsible for an additional 80,000 abandoned mine sites currently managed by DOI and USDA. The proposal directs EPA to streamline, reduce, and tailor its oversight activities to focus on national consistency and technical assistance to the states as needed, and then to assess the best locations from which to provide key functions and services. EPA would also review the current laboratory enterprise in an effort to operate the agency's labs in a more strategic, consistent, and efficient manner.

Department of the Interior (DOI)

The proposal includes the proposed reorganization of DOI regional boundaries for its bureaus and offices, and encourages co-location of bureau offices to share administrative support services across DOI's organizational units.

Department of Education (DOEd)

A cabinet level change would merge DOEd and the Department of Labor (DOL) into a single federal agency, to be known as the Department of Education and the Workforce (DEW), with the intent to meet the needs of American students and workers, from education and skill development to workplace protection and retirement security. Under DEW, four main sub-agencies would focus on K-12, Higher Education/Workforce Development, Enforcement, and Research/Evaluation/Administration. The K-12 agency would administer activities that are currently implemented by DOEd's Offices of Elementary and Secondary Education, Innovation and Improvement, English Language Acquisition, and Special Education Programs. The new American Workforce and Higher Education Administration (AWHEA) would bring together current DOL workforce development programs and DOEd vocational education, rehabilitation, and higher education programs. The Research, Evaluation, and Administration agency would include centralized offices focused on policy development, research, and evaluation, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics would be moved to the Department of Commerce as part of an effort to bring the primary economic statistical agencies under one umbrella.

Office of Personnel Management (OPM)

The proposal would move OPM's policy function into the Executive Office of the President (EOP). In the reorganization plan justification, OMB argues that the civil service system is overdue for an overhaul, which would best be implemented under a new management structure more focused on core priorities and not molded around the existing framework of civil service rules and regulations. This EOP "Government Services Agency" would centralize policy decisions in areas such as employee compensation, workforce supply and demand, identification of future workforce skill needs, leadership and talent management, and other important issues.

Sources: E&E News; Federal Register; U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform; White House.
