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Most agencies expand staffs in 2011

By STEPHEN LOSEY | Last Updated: February 7, 2010

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The federal workforce will decline slightly in 2011, but most agencies will see their staffs grow next year.

The difference results from the Census Bureau, which will add hundreds of thousands of temporary workers for 2010 for its decennial population count.

The overall federal workforce is projected to decline by about 42,600 in fiscal 2011, but it will remain at slightly more than 2 million people — federal staffing topped that benchmark for the first time this year.

The Defense Department plans to grow its civilian workforce from 720,200 to 757,500, as it insources work now done by contractors.

The Homeland Security Department is also expected to grow from 177,000 employees to 183,500. The Transportation Security Administration will add 5,355 screeners to run advanced imaging units at airports. Customs and Border Protection plans to hire 318 new officers for passenger and cargo screening at ports of entry and 103 new intelligence analysts. Peggy Sherry, Homeland Security's acting chief financial officer, said the department will hire more cybersecurity experts and air marshals as well.

But the department will cut 180 Border Patrol agents through attrition in 2011. Homeland Security said the Border Patrol doesn't need as many agents because its workforce is becoming more experienced and effective.

And the Coast Guard will cut more than 1,100 people from its ranks as it decommissions some old boats and brings new boats on line. Homeland Security said the Coast Guard is trying to reorganize and become more efficient.

The Veterans Affairs Department would grow from 284,300 employees to 287,700. The department said the proposed increased staff and its \$11 billion budget increase will help it process more benefits claims, improve mental health care for vets, and fight homelessness among veterans.

The Education, Justice and Health and Human Services departments also plan staffing increases. The Commerce, Agriculture and Interior departments are the only Cabinet-level agencies planning staffing cuts.

The biggest swing in staffing next year is at the Commerce Department, which will let go of almost 1.2 million temporary census takers — the equivalent of about 99,000 full-time workers.

Is government too big?

Some say the growth in the government's payroll is an unavoidable consequence of the challenges facing the nation — two wars, an ongoing terrorist threat and a troubled economy.

"In no way does this suggest the government is getting too large," said John Palguta, vice president of policy at the Partnership for Public Service. "There are significant workforce needs in the government, and we should be filling those. I think it's a fairly modestly sized workforce, given the nature of their tasks."

But conservative critics say it's a sign that the government has taken on too much, and worry unchecked spending growth will eventually bankrupt the nation.

"We're seeing a permanent increase in the size of the government workforce," said James Sherk of the Heritage Foundation. "Contrast that with what's happening in the private sector. The government is not tightening its belt. It would be better if everybody shared in the downturn, instead of public workers being insulated because

Washington is not going to make any cutbacks."

Robert Tobias, director of American University's Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation, said the relative size of the federal workforce needs to be taken into context. He pointed to statistics in the White House budget released last week that said the ratio of feds to Americans has dropped from one in 78 in 1953 to one in 155 in 2008.

The administration is estimating the federal work force will have grown by more than 274,000 — or 15 percent — between fiscal 2007 and 2011. And 79 percent of that growth took place at the Defense, Homeland Security, Justice, State and Veterans Affairs departments.

Those agencies "are centrally involved in fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, providing care for our returning veterans, protecting our country from the threat of terrorism, and advancing our nation's interests forward," the budget said.

Palguta said he hopes Congress adequately funds the government's staffing needs and doesn't catch federal employees in the middle of debates over spending and the proper role of government.

"The starve-the-beast strategy is a very poor strategy [for effective government, and] it helps some people avoid articulating the tougher choices," Palguta said. "Saying we want the government to do what it's doing but with less people doesn't make sense. What's lacking in our dialogue is specifics on 'OK, what do we not do or what do we cut back on significantly?'"

But vast Clintonesque cuts in the federal workforce would be a mistake, said Bill Bransford, general counsel for the Senior Executives Association.

"Some parts of the government were left underserved," Bransford said, adding he was glad to see the 2011 budget plans to hire more acquisition workers, which he said is long overdue.

After the Clinton administration cut the federal workforce by about 325,000, the government grew steadily during the George W. Bush administration. The last time the size of the federal workforce dropped by more than a few thousand was in fiscal 2001 — after the 2000 census and before the Sept. 11 attacks brought a swift focus to the government's homeland security, war-fighting and intelligence needs.

Tobias said the size of the federal workforce doesn't matter as much as whether it is accomplishing its mission effectively. Arguing about the number of federal workers is a way to avoid asking hard questions about the role of government, Tobias said.

"You can criticize Congress for putting too much on the executive branch," Tobias said. "But once the law is passed and must be implemented, the question is, are we doing it in the most effective manner possible?"

Hiring reforms

The budget also calls for hiring reforms, though it did not spell out new initiatives. Federal agencies take about five months on average to hire a new employee, and many talented job candidates lose interest and accept jobs elsewhere during that wait.

The White House said it will announce later this year new strategies for recruiting and assessing candidates and will propose regulatory and legislative changes to further streamline the hiring process. The Office of Personnel Management wants 80 percent of agencies to cut hiring times by September 2011, and to improve satisfaction for job applicants and hiring managers.