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GAO PRESSES DOE TO ADDRESS PROTECTIVE FORCE PERSONNEL ISSUES

Reflecting the growing unhappiness of the Department of Energy's protective forces, the Government Accountability Office late last month urged the Department of Energy to accelerate progress to address career and longevity issues faced by the Department's security contractors or reconsider federalizing the workers that protect the nation's nuclear weapons sites. In its Jan. 29 report, *DOE Needs to Address Protective Forces' Personnel System Issues*, the GAO did not take a side in the debate about federalizing the guard force—an idea the Department officially abandoned last year—but it pressed DOE to enhance the longevity and retirement options faced by the Department's protective force personnel.

The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks brought about significant changes to the Department's protective forces as they morphed from an industrial security posture to more of a tactical response force to protect the DOE sites that house Category I/II nuclear materials, like Los Alamos National Laboratory, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, the Savannah River Site, the Pantex Plant, Idaho National Laboratory, the Nevada Test Site and the Y-12 National Security Complex. The change, however, brought with it an increase in the demands on officers, as well as an uptick in injury rates and attrition, driving up recruiting, hiring and training costs. Retirement benefits haven't changed, however, creating a disconnect that has drawn the attention of Congress for years, with lawmakers calling the disconnect "problematic" in the Fiscal Year 2010 Defense Authorization Act. "Protective force contractors, unions, and DOE security officials are concerned that the implementation of [tactical response force's] more rigorous requirements and the current protective forces' personnel systems threaten the ability of protective forces—especially older members—to continue their

careers until retirement age,” the GAO report said.

GAO Unhappy With ‘Limited’ Action

Specifically, the GAO criticized the Department for taking “limited” action on a series of recommendations to improve career longevity and protective force performance that were delivered last year by a study group chartered by DOE’s Office of Health, Safety and Security. The group advocated a host of changes to Department policy that would more clearly define the necessary requirements for certain protective force jobs and make it easier for protective force officers to transition to less physically demanding jobs, both within protective force organizations or in the Department as a whole, potentially expanding the career paths for workers. The GAO said that revamping the management of the protective forces personnel or federalizing the force could result in effective security “if wellmanaged.” Thus far, however, DOE has taken action on only one of the committee’s recommendations—extending the life of the committee. The GAO said the Department and NNSA were in varying stages of reviews to advance the other 28 recommendations, and had standardized protective force personnel uniforms and the cloth shields used on the uniforms in response to part of one recommendation. The group categorized 14 of its 29 recommendations as “low” or “no-cost” actions, which included expanding fitness and wellness programs, reviews of training requirements and a study on maximizing the number of armed and unarmed positions that could be held by protective force officers when they can’t meet more rigorous physical requirements. “The responsibility lies with DOE, working with protective force unions and contractors, to further develop and implement these initiatives and recommendations,” the GAO said. “However, if DOE decides not to take meaningful actions or if its actions will not achieve the intended goals, an examination of other options, including the federalization of the protective forces, may be merited.”

Issue Has Been ‘Studied to Death’

The Project on Government Oversight watchdog group also called on the Department to move quickly to address the problem. “It’s about time that DOE fixes this problem. It has been studied to death,” said POGO Executive Director Danielle Brian. “As the GAO concludes—if DOE doesn’t solve the problem satisfactorily, then the guard forces should be federalized.”

Randy Lawson, the president of the Oak Ridge chapter of the International Guards Union of America, said he was disappointed with the Department’s response to the recommendations and hinted at difficult negotiations when protective force bargaining agreements next expire at Oak Ridge, Pantex and Savannah River in 2012. “We’ve made it known to DOE that if they don’t get these problems

fixed, the membership has told us if we can't do something with defined benefit plans or career longevity, it's going to be a tough negotiation," Lawson said. "They're already talking strike at all three sites." Michael Kane, the NNSA's Associate Administrator for Management and Administration, said the agency generally agreed with the GAO report and its recommendations, but said the report "does not give full credit to the Department for significant efforts taken to address protective force issues."