

Lawmakers Push Back on Defense Workforce Cap

By Emily Long

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Senate Democrats are fighting a Defense Department plan to freeze civilian hiring, saying it would increase the work done by government contractors.

In a July 7 letter, Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., urged Defense Secretary Leon Panetta to reconsider a proposal that would hold the number of civilian employees at fiscal 2010 levels. Congress has ordered Defense not to impose an arbitrary head count on its workforce, which would compel the department to rely more heavily on contractors, she wrote. Sens. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa.; Claire McCaskill, D-Mo.; Patty Murray, D-Wash.; and Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, co-signed the letter.

"Freezing the size of the department's civilian workforce at [fiscal 2010] levels without any comparable limitations on contractors does not guarantee any cost savings," they wrote. "However, this freeze would guarantee that new work and expansions to the existing workload must be performed by service contractors -- even if this work is 'inherently governmental.' "

Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates in August 2010 announced plans to eliminate redundant organizations, reduce funding for support contractors, freeze personnel levels and cut jobs. In January, he identified \$154 billion in efficiencies, including a three-year hiring freeze, a fee hike for military retirees eligible for TRICARE health care coverage and cuts to U.S. fighting forces.

A March memorandum ordered Pentagon officials to eliminate hundreds of officer positions, top civilian executives and contractor jobs by the end of fiscal 2011 on Sept. 30.

"Government staffing decisions should be based on needs and priorities, not bean counting," Brown said in a statement. "With ever tightening budgets, DoD, like the rest of the government, needs to be run as efficiently as possible. Arbitrary head counts serve no one."

Defense did not respond to a request for comment before this story was published.