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A year in waste: Top examples of government fiscal follies

Presenting the top five Golden Hammer 'winners'

By Phillip Swarts

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Even in an age of government belt-tightening, one thing Washington featured in abundance once again in 2013 was waste. What follows are five top examples culled from reporting in The Washington Times over the past 12 months, examples of misguided and pointless spending of taxpayer dollars so egregious they earned the coveted "Golden Hammer" award:

5. The \$98,000 Outhouse

It wasn't one of the biggest example of federal waste, but it showed how easily government spending can sometimes spiral out of control. A trailhead in Denali National Park in Alaska needed a restroom, so the [Interior Department](#) purchased an outhouse for it. The problem was that officials bought it from a company in Oregon, nearly 2,500 miles away.

According to the company's website, the single-toilette unit itself costs \$10,000, but by the time the government was done with transportation and installation, the bill had reached \$98,670.

The [purchase](#) was also made in September, at the end of the federal fiscal year. Government agencies have long been criticized for a "use-it-or-lose-it" mentality to burn through their unused funding, lest they receive a lower budget number for the next year. It's led to some questionable purchases that often have watchdogs crying foul.

4. The [Energy Department](#) and its contractors

The government does billions of dollars in business each year, and there are lots of companies that contract with the government to get a slice of that pie. Some do good work, but all too many try to take advantage of lax federal oversight.

For instance investigators have repeatedly found the [Energy Department](#) is signing checks without looking at what private contractors are spending the [money](#) on.

In July, the agency's Inspector General found officials spent \$37 million paying for contractors to come to D.C. because the [department](#) was offering excessive sums for moving and living expenses. Then in October, the IG warned that as much as 10 percent of a \$1 billion investment into renewable [car](#) batteries may have instead been spent on food, drink and entertainment for contractors.

Meanwhile, the agency's labs are often plagued by wasteful construction, such as a \$54 million tab for the design of a radioactive waste treatment plant that is currently 11 years behind schedule.

3. [Medicare](#) and Medicaid

Health care was been a huge issue in 2013, and [Congress](#) continues to grapple with how to fix the ailing benefits program. One thing that doesn't help is the millions of dollars in waste uncovered in the programs.

A December investigation found that [Medicare](#) paid \$24 million for full vials of medicine, even when health care providers were only using part of the vial. It's the kind of thing that happens often with the program, said Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

"This is endemic. This isn't just a one-off thing. This is systemic. This is because doctors and [Medicare](#) enrollees are all spending the taxpayers' dollars," he said. "It's someone else's money, so who cares?"

There were lots of other examples this year as well, including the Centers for [Medicare](#) and Medicaid Services spending \$17 million on sleep studies that never took place.

2. Afghanistan

Most U.S. troops are set to leave Afghanistan by the end of 2014, but efforts at reconstruction are still hemorrhaging money. Investigators at the Pentagon, State Department and Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) are continuing to find billions of dollars in waste.

In July, watchdogs warned that as much as \$1 billion in reconstruction efforts might have been siphoned off by corrupt officials and the illegal imposition of fees and tariffs.

There's been misspending on military bases too. Twice in 2013 SIGAR found examples of military officers paying \$5 million to construct new incinerators, then never using the devices before tearing them down.

But perhaps one of the most egregious spending mistakes came in February. Inspectors found the U.S. gave more than \$1 billion to the Afghan National Army for fuel [purchases](#). Yet oversight of the payout was so lax that investigators think some of that money in turn went to purchase oil from Iran, a clear violation of international sanctions.

1. The government shutdown

Not only did it bring the government to a screeching halt, it wound up costing taxpayers a boatload of money as well. Estimates on just how much the shutdown cost vary, but the Standard & Poor's credit agency estimated that the bill for taxpayers was \$24 billion.

Part of that sum is the backpay owed to “non-essential” federal workers who were furloughed, estimated at more than \$2 billion. That prompted Sen Tom Coburn, Oklahoma Republican, to question the back salaries.

“It is not the fault of these civil servants that [Congress](#) did not do its job and, like everyone else, they have bills to pay,” Mr. Coburn wrote in his 2013 Wastebook. “But it is truly unfair to charge billions of dollars to pay others not to work to taxpayers working to cover their own bills and the bills of the government.”