

Lawmaker: March 9 hearing is 'first step' toward performance pay

By STEPHEN LOSEY | Last Updated: March 3, 2011

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The congressman who chairs the House panel that oversees federal workforce issues said he aims to establish a pay-for-performance system for federal employees.

A hearing planned for next week on federal pay is "my first step" toward that goal, Rep. Dennis Ross, R-Fla., said in an interview Thursday.

Ross, chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform subcommittee on the federal work force, U.S. Postal Service and labor policy, said the March 9 hearing will examine the difference between federal and private-sector employees' pay, and what performance-based incentives are available in the government and private sector.

"Those doing their job well should be rewarded, and those who are not should look elsewhere," Ross said. "That's a common trait in the private sector."

Ross wants to cut federal staffing levels by at least 10 percent — which equates to roughly 200,000 federal jobs — and said a pay-for-performance system will be necessary to properly manage a leaner federal work force.

"It's not my intention to swing an ax and say, 'The federal work force has to go, they're terrible,' " Ross said. "I don't think that. They're tremendously good employees. But we've got to change the culture so, as we reduce the size of government, those who stay are getting adequately rewarded and compensated."

But he acknowledged that "the devil's in the details" when trying to establish a system that pays employees based on how well — or poorly — they perform.

"When we talk pay for performance, we need goals, we need the tools necessary to accomplish those goals, and we have to adequately compensate them when they achieve those goals," Ross said. "If we expect the top performance out of employees, we need to make sure we give them the tools to accomplish that."

He said the government needs to talk to federal employees and their representatives to find out what kind of technologies or resources they need to more efficiently do their jobs.

"The work force is a necessary partner in the changes that have to come," Ross said. "This is their livelihood. I've already talked to several federal unions, and they understand we're all in this together."

Ross expects the issue of federal collective bargaining will come up during the hearing, titled "Are Federal Workers Underpaid?", since recent efforts to curtail state employees' bargaining rights have sparked heated protests in Wisconsin and elsewhere. But unlike state employees, most federal employees can't bargain over pay or benefits. And Ross said he's not aware of any legislation in the works that seeks to limit federal collective bargaining rights.

The debate over federal pay has raged for more than a year, but a consensus is still far off. Conservative and libertarian think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute say that federal employees are vastly overcompensated, especially when benefits are factored in. But the federal government says its studies show that federal employees are paid 24 percent less than their private-sector counterparts, when factors such as experience, education and responsibilities are taken into account.

Many experts agree that the government's current method of determining the federal pay gap — which has been heavily criticized for its complexity and lack of transparency — should be abolished and replaced with a new