The government has no idea how many agencies it has

By: Josh Peterson – May 3, 2013

The U.S. government does not know how many agencies and programs it is asking taxpayers to fund, The Daily Caller has learned.

Even though the editors of Wikipedia have been able to assemble a list of federal agencies, no complete official government list of federal agencies and programs currently exists.

The Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA) — which became law on January 4, 2011 — established required quarterly performance assessments of government programs.

That bill also mandated that the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) create a website that would publish quarterly performance reports by the heads of each agency.

Currently that website — Performance.gov, which was launched in 2011 — contains only a partial list of government programs, and important agencies such as the FCC aren't on the list.

OMB is an office within the executive that is responsible for budget development and agency oversight. A spokesperson for the OMB did not respond to The Daily Caller's request for comment.

A spokesperson for the Congressional Budget Office also confirmed to The Daily Caller that the CBO did not have a list of agencies and programs, and instead referred The Daily Caller to the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

A GAO spokesman, in turn, referred The Daily Caller to OMB, stating that no list of programs has existed in the past because of the lack of a consensus within the federal government about what constitutes a program.

"OMB has not released the list of federal programs but has an effort underway to develop a count," said another GAO official.

The CBO is a non-partisan legislative branch agency responsible for providing the "budget committees and Congress with objective, impartial information about budgetary and economic issues."

The GAO is an independent legislative branch agency that acts as "the congressional watchdog," responsible for investigating "how the federal government spends taxpayer dollars."

GPRAMA also required agencies to publish their strategic and performance plans in searchable, machine-readable formats for fiscal year 2012.

Machine-readable formats are data formats that can be easily understood by computers, such as XML or StratML.

Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute, told The Daily Caller that no useful list of government agencies exists.

Harper has been advocating for the creation a machine-readable federal government organization chart of several years.

The chart would map out how the federal government's agencies and subagencies, bureaus and programs all interconnect.

"There are several lists, but none of them are machine-readable and they are by no means complete registries of the organizational units of government," said Harper.

Harper made a similar point in a January 2012 essay about the lack of a machine-readable federal government organization chart.

Many reports, he wrote, are currently published in formats like PDF, which make it more difficult for the data to be useful to a computer.

A bill to establish reporting standards, which was supported by House Oversight Committee Chairman Darrell Issa, successfully made it through the House in 2012 only to die in the Senate.

That bill, called the Digital Transparency and Accountability Act (DATA Act), is currently awaiting reintroduction in the House.

Hudson Hollister, founder and executive director of the Data Transparency Coalition, told The Daily Caller that it is currently nobody's job within the federal government to set data standards, which include both consistent identifying numbers for agencies and federal grantees, as well as consistent data formats that are machine-readable.

"When I was working for the House, I asked everybody because I was doing oversight, and I wanted to have a list of agencies," said Hollister, who previously served as counsel for the House Oversight Committee.

"I asked CRS, and I asked GAO, and I asked OMB, and they all disagreed" about the number of agencies that exist in the federal government, Hollister said.

CRS, or Congressional Research Service, is a legislative branch agency within the Library of Congress that provides legal and policy analysis to committees and members.

Hollister pointed out that federal contractors and grantees are also identified differently by each agency.

The lack of a consistent identifier, he said, makes it difficult to track federal spending across the government.

"OMB and Treasury use different identification numbers for agencies, and nobody agrees on the number of federal agencies we have," said Hollister.

"Without data standards — both identifiers and consistent formats — its impossible to find systemic risk from the data that's submitted to the regulators," he said.

"The government is a single enterprise, but it is not managed as one," he said.