



Duplication and the Delta Regional Authority

Steve Wilson and Steff Thomas

January 11, 2017

During NASA's heyday, the agency used duplication on key systems as a safety feature for space travel.

But duplication isn't always a positive thing, especially when it comes to federal programs such as the Delta Regional Authority, which is under the microscope for what critics say is needless overlap with other programs.

In his report titled "Federal Fumbles: 100 Ways the Government Dropped the Ball Vol. 2," U.S. Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma scrutinized the DRA and other agencies for using federal grant and taxpayer money to implement projects too similar to existing programs within other state or federal agencies.

"Congress should reevaluate whether the Delta Authority remains necessary. If so, the Authority should work with Congress to ensure it funds projects that are not duplicates of work done by other federal agencies and that are truly in the national interest," wrote Lankford, a Republican who has picked up the budget-hawk torch from his Oklahoma predecessor, retired Sen. Tom Coburn, who published the annual Wastebook (now produced by Arizona Republican Sen. Jeff Flake).

But Lankford isn't the only critic of the authority.

The Citizens Against Government Waste's annual "Pig Book" castigates the Delta Regional Authority as well.

The Republican Study Committee's fiscal 2016 budget says the DRA and other such regional commissions are "duplicative of other federal programs and support mostly local projects."

Lankford also stresses that point: "Taxpayers on the other side of the country should not be asked to foot the bill for local spending projects or for programs that directly duplicate actions taken by other federal departments," he writes in "Federal Fumbles."

Even President Barack Obama has called for cutting the program's \$16 million a year budget by \$3 million a year.

Danny Bedwell, a former Libertarian candidate for Congress and a business owner in Columbus, says the DRA isn't necessary.

"This money came from Ohio, Washington, Vermont and New York," Bedwell said. "We're spending it on museums in the Delta. We're spending it on drilling wells in Leland. We're

spending it on all of this stuff that is local-specific and I don't think it's fair to the people of Ohio, Florida or wherever, take their money and for things we want in Mississippi. It's nationalism and it's the opposite of federalism."

'Properly state and local activities'

Created in 2000, the Delta Regional Authority is an economic development program aimed at creating jobs across 252 counties and parishes in the Mississippi Delta states of Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee (seven of those eight states have Republican governors).

Since its inception, the DRA has spent \$138 million in federal tax money on, it says, 934 projects, creating or retaining more than 46,000 jobs.

When the authority announces funding for a program, it often does so with great fanfare. Local media flock to report on initiatives such as \$800,000 for road and water infrastructure work in Illinois, \$50,000 grants to early-stage entrepreneurs in Arkansas, and \$250,000 to promote financial literacy in Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee.

It's also popular with many elected officials in the Republican-dominated state, including Gov. Phil Bryant.

"Gov. Bryant has always believed the Delta Regional Authority's work provides a clear benefit to the state's region of greatest need, the Mississippi Delta," said Bryant spokesman Clay Chandler. "Because of DRA's singular focus, he would not be in favor of folding it into another agency."

But critics of the DRA and of other regional authorities say such programs too often duplicate those run by the Small Businesses Administration, the Department of Labor, the National Institutes of Health and other federal agencies.

While Lankford wants to see the authority eliminated, the Cato Institute's Chris Edwards said the problem runs deeper than the funding of one or even a handful of duplicative regional authorities.

Edwards, editor director of tax policy studies and editor of *Downsizing the Government*, has said that the U.S. government is a dysfunctional bureaucracy with no incentive to cut cost or improve quality.

"Congress passes programs that have minority support all the time," Edwards said at a Nov. 30 event on cutting spending in the Trump administration. "The bigger the government gets, the more logrolling we have."

That logrolling makes it difficult to eliminate any program, however unnecessary.

"What we really need is structural reforms to the federal budget to terminate programs and to get the federal government out of properly state and local activities," he said.

Lankford has suggested that if Congress can't get rid of the duplication, it can at least subject it to more transparency and monitoring.

Lack of transparency led Tim Walberg, a Minnesota Republican, to introduce legislation in the 114th Congress that would require agencies to list for public view each program they administer, costs associated with the program, expenditures for services, number of program beneficiaries and the staff involved. The House passed the bill, but the Senate never acted. The topic is likely to be revisited in the new Congress.