

Government Executive

Trump Orders Agencies to Slash Federal Advisory Panels

Scientific community worries the cuts will eliminate its impact on federal decision-making.

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President Trump has issued a mandate that all federal agencies cut one-third of the advisory committees they use to solicit outside expertise, calling for a governmentwide review of all existing panels and a new cap on such groups going forward.

Trump suggested in an executive order issued late last week that many of the advisory committees are unnecessary or obsolete, making them prime for elimination. The Office of Management and Budget will soon inform each agency of the number of committees they must cut to reach the targets in the order. The committees serve to advise agencies with perspectives from business, academia, intergovernmental officials and other interests, and operate under the 1972 Federal Advisory Committee Act.

The president set a cap of 350 total federal advisory committees, though according to the General Services Administration there are currently about 1,000 (or 1,009 as of fiscal 2015, according to the Congressional Research Service). The committees have 72,000 members and about \$368 million in annual costs, CRS said.

OMB can issue waivers to enable agencies to cut fewer committees than would otherwise be required under the order if “it is necessary for the delivery of essential services, for effective program delivery or because it is otherwise warranted by the public interest.” New committees that would put the government as a whole above the 350 cap level would be prohibited unless they also receive a waiver from OMB.

Trump said agencies should look to eliminate committees that have accomplished their objectives, examined subject matter that has become obsolete, seen their functions assumed by another federal entity or that have costs that outweigh benefits. Agencies can count committees already eliminated during the Trump administration toward their reduction totals.

John Palguta, a former vice president at the Partnership for Public Service who has established and served on federal advisory committees during his decades in government, noted that agencies must already justify such panels before standing them up and can terminate them at any time.

"This executive order seems to be a solution in search of a problem," said Palguta, who added that every advisory committee he has served on was legitimate and useful. "The executive order's limit on the total number of committees that can exist and the requirement for each agency to eliminate one-third of their current advisory committee strikes me as pretty arbitrary."

The order does not apply to "a merit review panel or advisory committee whose primary purpose is to provide scientific expertise to support agencies making decisions related to the safety or efficacy of products to be marketed to American consumers." Still, the scientific community expressed concern about potential fallout from the order. The administration has faced significant backlash for reshaping, eliminating or stripping the power of existing advisory panels.

"For the past two years they have been shrinking and restricting the role of federal science advisory committees," said Gretchen Goldman, research director for the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists. "Now they're removing the possibility of even making decisions based on robust science advice. It's no longer death by a thousand cuts. It's taking a knife to the jugular."

Chris Edwards, however, an analyst at the Cato Institute and editor of DownsizingGovernment.org, said the order represented a small win for small-government conservatives who have largely been pushed aside by the Trump administration, though he called the forthcoming eliminations "symbolic."

"Trump the populist has not focused on spending cuts, and indeed has gone along with the big-spending of Republicans and Democrats in Congress on bill after bill," said Edwards, highlighting the spending bills Trump has signed despite the cuts recommended in his own budget. "Eliminating some advisory committees would be 'cleaning out the attic' of the federal budget and is a modest, but long overdue, reform."

Agencies will in the coming months begin reporting to OMB on each of their advisory committees, either justifying their existence or proposing elimination. OMB will then submit a plan to Trump by Sept. 1 on the committees that will be axed.