



## Places to eliminate 'waste, fraud'

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The following editorial ran in the Oct. 9 edition of The Billings Gazette.

As often as members of Congress rail against “waste and abuse,” Americans might expect they would leap at the opportunity to blast a program that may have misspent much of \$1.4 billion over the past decade.

But the scathing U.S. Senate report on the wastefulness and failings of national security “fusion centers” is unlikely to shut them down, according to the Associated Press. Not only have fusion centers spied on U.S. citizens in the United States, they have morphed from their intended anti-terrorism mission to general criminal investigation. However, they channel federal grants to states and lawmakers don’t want to cut off funds to their districts.

With a 2003 law, Congress directed the Federal Emergency Management Agency to distribute fusion center grants directly to states; FEMA has given states wide latitude in deciding how to spend hundreds of millions.

n Pennsylvania spent more than \$2 million on a center that never opened.

n Ohio officials used grants to buy rugged laptop computers they gave to a morgue.

n San Diego bought 55 flat screen TVs for watching cable news.

More troubling than questionable spending are instances of illegal or false intelligence gathering. For example:

n In March 2008, the Virginia fusion center issued a terrorism threat assessment that said the state’s colleges were “nodes for radicalization” and characterized “diversity” surrounding a Virginia military base and the state’s “historically black” colleges as possible threats.

n Also that year, an analyst at a Wisconsin fusion center prepared a report about protesters on both sides of the abortion debate, although no violence was expected.

n An Illinois fusion center reported that Russian hackers broke into the computer system of a Springfield water district last year and sent computer commands that caused a water pump to burn out. In fact, a repair tech had remotely accessed the district's computer while vacationing in Russia.

The Senate investigation revealed that Department of Homeland Security provided only one week of training to staff assigned to sift through tips and uncorroborated information about U.S. citizens.

Concern about the fusion centers has come from both ends of the political spectrum for several years.

"Fusion centers, which cost the federal taxpayers at most a few hundred million a year, are symptoms of a larger problem," Benjamin Friedman of the Libertarian Cato Institute wrote last week. "The entire national security apparatus has grown by leaps and bounds since 2001."

Friedman said that fusion centers have become "a classic solution in search of a problem."

The Senate committee report drew a call from the ACLU for further investigation.

"We hope that continuing oversight and stronger regulation will prohibit law enforcement intelligence collection without reasonable suspicion of criminal activity," said Michael German, senior ACLU counsel. "The ACLU warned back in 2007 that fusion centers posed grave threats to Americans' privacy and civil liberties, and that they needed clear guidelines and independent oversight."

Saving "a few hundred million a year" won't erase the federal deficit, but it's a start. Eleven years after 9/11, America's elected leaders must be vigilant in holding national security agencies and federal grant recipients accountable. If the antiterrorism money isn't being used for that purpose, or is duplicating what other agencies are doing, Congress and the president should eliminate the spending. National security is the federal government's top priority. That mission must be accomplished without violating citizens' rights or wasting their money.