

## Federal government: Is it just too big to work?

By: Ken Newton-August 4, 2013

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With the numbers a muddle, Missouri Sen. Roy Blunt made a request of two federal agencies: please agree on some facts.

Easier said than done.

On a Missouri levee project involving millions of federal dollars, the agencies, the Agriculture Department and the Army Corps of Engineers, differed in the number of wetland acres at issue. The difference, the senator noted, amounted to 117,500 acres.

“That is a pretty big discrepancy,” Mr. Blunt said last month on the Senate floor. “These are two government agencies. There is only one definition for wetland. Is it 500 acres or 118,000 acres?”

### **‘Do not pay’ list**

If Mr. Blunt found fault with these two entities not agreeing (actually, the Interior Department offered yet another number, 13,651 acres), inter-agency variations prove not altogether rare.

Last week, the Government Accountability Office released a report showing that agencies in the USDA continued to make millions of dollars in farm subsidy payments to deceased individuals because they did not cross-reference their check-writing with a Social Security Administration database of dead Americans.

This report came out just more than three years after the Obama administration moved to create a “do not pay” list that would eliminate just such a problem.

“We’re making sure that payments no longer go to the deceased. It sounds ridiculous even to say it,” said Vice President Joe Biden at the time.

The recent incidents and others beg a question or two: Is the bureaucracy in Washington, even in the age of information, so bloated that sharing the most basic information becomes a chore? More broadly, has the federal government become just too big to function as a working operation?

Yes and yes, said Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst for the Washington-based Cato Institute.

“If you want the government to screw up less, give it less to do,” he said.

## **A leaner work force?**

Some make the numerical case that the federal work force has gotten leaner in the last half-century. In 1963, the executive branch civilian employment roll (excluding the uniformed military and the much smaller legislative and judicial labor force) stood at 2.5 million workers while serving an American population of nearly 180 million.

By 2011, this category of government workers amounted to 2.75 million while the U.S. population topped 308 million.

But Mr. DeHaven pointed out that numbers tell only part of the story. Instead, government involvement in all aspects of people's lives has grown disproportionately.

"If you look at the bureaucracy in terms of bodies, it really hasn't changed that much," he said. "What is to me a bigger issue, and problem, is that there is so much more to do, so much more to keep track of."

The recognition of this has not been new in forming. In the 1990s, Vice President Al Gore headed a Clinton administration initiative called the National Partnership for Reinventing Government. In the 1940s, President Harry Truman formed the Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government and appointed former President Herbert Hoover as its leader.

But reorganization efforts seem a durable enterprise. Just last year, President Obama announced an attempt to streamline some federal programs.

"Landlines have turned into smart phones. The Cold War has given way to globalization. So much has happened, and yet the government we have today is largely the government we had back then," said Mr. Obama, a Democrat.

## **A dated system**

Mr. Blunt, a Republican, said something in a conference call last week that sounded like a familiar and bipartisan echo of this.

"If they continue to be successful, nobody runs their business like they did 20 years ago, but the government still very much runs like it did 20 years ago," the Missouri senator said. "We don't even have an analog government in a digital world. We basically have a carbon-paper government in a digital world."

Mr. DeHaven said government inefficiency remains a problem because incentives have been reversed from normal business models. In most businesses, efficiency equals profit. In the government, inefficiency has only the consequence of more money being spent to address the inefficiency.

"Government will never run like a business because it's not a business," the budget analyst said. "The only real way, in my opinion, to reduce the waste and the abuse and the nonsense is to terminate agencies, functions and responsibilities."