

Comptroller general pans CRS study of GAO pay

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When Comptroller General David Walker was trying to win congressional authority in 2003 to overhaul his agency's pay system, he told lawmakers that employees who met or exceeded performance expectations would receive raises.

According to a new Congressional Research Service report, that didn't happen: more than 300 GAO analysts didn't receive across-the-board pay raises last year, even though they were eligible for performance-based raises and bonuses. Walker admits that he promised that all well-performing employees would receive an annual across-the-board adjustment. But he argues that the CRS report and his critics are ignoring key events that occurred since then that forced him to adjust the way Government Accountability Office employees are paid.

Namely, since 2003, Congress passed a law requiring him to pay employee salaries that would be comparable to what they would make in the labor market and to pay employees performing work of equal value the same amount. A study of GAO's pay scales conducted in 2004 by Watson Wyatt found that many GAO analysts were overpaid compared to what employees with comparable skills and experience were getting at other agencies and in non-federal sectors.

"I'm very disappointed CRS did not provide GAO with an opportunity to comment on their report or their testimony prior to their finalization," Walker said in an interview with Federal Times. "They're ignoring a huge and very material subsequent event: the results of our first competitive compensation study."

The CRS report also said that Walker has failed to explain in detail how new market-based pay scales and salary adjustments at GAO were determined, as required by law.

Walker said he could not divulge details of the compensation study conducted by Watson Wyatt, which served as the basis for the new pay scales at GAO, because the report is proprietary.

Watson Wyatt surveyed jobs in other sectors that are comparable to those held by GAO analysts. The study determined that GAO had two types of analysts lumped together in the same pay range. Some were overpaid and some were underpaid, according to GAO statements summarizing the survey. Agency officials divided the analysts into two new pay ranges. Analysts placed in the higher range could make \$10,000 more than they had previously. The maximum potential salary of analysts in the lower range dropped by more than \$14,000.

"We've provided more transparency on that study than is typically the case in connection with these matters. I'm frankly very surprised why CRS wouldn't be able to review that information and understand" how the two pay ranges were developed, Walker said.

Some analysts who were placed in the lower pay scale have complained to lawmakers and the media about the change. Walker concedes it was difficult for some employees to adjust. But, he said, the law is clear.

“It would have been inappropriate and inconsistent with the law to provide across-the-board compensation adjustment in excess of competitive levels,” he said.

CRS conducted the review at the request of Rep. Danny Davis, D-Ill., who chairs the House Oversight and Government Reform subcommittee on the federal workforce.