

Lawmakers probe GAO decision on pay adjustments

By **Brittany R. Ballenstedt**
bballenstedt@govexec.com

Democrats on a House subcommittee are asking the Government Accountability Office to hand over information related to a compensation study the agency relied on to make pay determinations last year.

In a [recent letter](#) to Comptroller General David M. Walker, members of the House Oversight and Government Reform subcommittee focused on the federal workforce urged GAO to provide detailed information on why 308 analysts at the agency received no pay raise last year even though they earned satisfactory job performance ratings. The issue was raised earlier this month in a Congressional Research Service report.

Lawmakers pointed to the 2004 GAO Reform Act, which requires the comptroller general to "consider various principles" in determining employees' pay, including the principle that "equal pay should be provided for work of equal value within each local pay area."

Walker was a strong advocate for passage of the GAO reform legislation in 2003, as a way to facilitate a more market-based and performance-oriented pay system. He promised lawmakers that, should Congress pass the bill, all GAO employees who "met expectations" would receive 2006 and 2007 across-the-board pay increases.

"As members of Congress, we take very seriously commitments that are made to us on the record," the lawmakers wrote in their March 16 letter. "Such commitments would be meaningless if the individual making the commitment can change their mind without first consulting with, and seeking the approval of, Congress."

Walker has defended his position on the raises by arguing that a study conducted by the consulting firm Watson Wyatt in 2004 found that many GAO analysts were overpaid relative to employees with comparable skills and experience at other agencies and outside government.

But lawmakers' concerns are tied to information related to the Watson Wyatt study, which GAO has argued is proprietary and therefore cannot be released. Lawmakers asked that Walker provide data including but not limited to the outside organizations that GAO compared itself to and which occupations within those organizations were compared to GAO analysts and specialists.

Walker answered the subcommittee in a [March 21 letter](#), saying that he intends to "expeditiously respond" to the request for information. But he added that certain information Watson Wyatt used in its work could not be released because it was proprietary, copyrighted and otherwise protected.

"I have asked my Office of General Counsel to review all Watson Wyatt documentation that we have and to provide it to you and to CRS," Walker wrote. "We will, however, be sure to identify any restrictions on redistribution or public dissemination."

Walker argued that based on the Watson Wyatt's findings, GAO's constrained budget and the annual pay adjustment provisions of the reform law, he determined that providing the raise to employees who were paid above market levels would be inappropriate from a policy perspective and would be inconsistent with the full range of statutory factors under the reform law.

Still, much of the concern by lawmakers is tied to the fact that Walker did not keep his word to ensure all qualifying employees received their promised raises. "It is very disturbing that you did not keep

your 2003 commitment to Congress to guarantee GAO employees who 'met expectations' the 2006 and 2007 annual across-the-board increases, and you did so without congressional knowledge or consent," the lawmakers wrote.

Walker acknowledged in his response letter that he regrets that "some unfortunate and unintended gaps in expectations" occurred in connection with the 2006 annual adjustment, and added that GAO has engaged in an extensive internal and external communication effort on the pay issue, with both Congress and its employees. "Therefore, such a gap in expectations and communications should not exist in connection with our 2007 pay adjustments," he wrote.

This document is located at <http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0307/032707b1.htm>

©2007 by National Journal Group Inc. All rights reserved.