

Barbara N Kemp <bnkemp@usgs.gov>
12/03/2002 02:01:04 PM

Record Type: Record

To: David C. Childs A-76comments/OMB/EOP@EOP, Kathy D Peter <kdpeter@usgs.gov>, Keith G Kirk <kkirk@usgs.gov>, William Sexton <wsexton@usgs.gov>

cc:
Subject: Competitive Outsourcing Comments

Here's a copy of my response to the competitive sourcing policy changes, and to the policy itself and the communication thereof--

RE: Competitive Outsourcing/A-76/FAIR ACT, as it applies to the Reports Unit, Idaho District, U.S. Geological Survey

I take exception to the process of and probable outcome of competitive outsourcing of Visual Information employees of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). I think the process should be stopped in its tracks and rethought. At the very least, the rationale, the vision, the long-term goals of the process should be logically and coherently presented to all employees-not only to those directly affected in the short term.

Let me describe to you the people who make up the Reports unit at the U.S. Geological Survey office in Boise, Idaho. We are three Technical Editors, one Scientific Illustrator, and one Office Automation Assistant. Our short-timer here has devoted 12 years, so far, to this unit; one of us has devoted 30 years, and together we have accumulated 93 years of experience in publishing Idaho District reports. We are the skeleton crew who have come together to the same office, worked together on the same reports, and lived together through four different Idaho District Chiefs, Reinvention of Government, downsizing, furloughs, threats to the existence of the USGS, dismemberment of the Geologic Division, and major disruption of operations as a result of computer security breaches. We highly respect each others' expertise and talents and rely heavily on these as we work together and with authors from the planning through draft and publication stages of each manuscript. We have been trained by-and some of us have sat elbow to elbow learning point by point from-the "forefathers" of our USGS publishing world, most of whom devoted their entire careers to the USGS and cared deeply about its mission and the integrity of its science and its reports. Having lived and breathed with them and edited, illustrated, and published by their accumulated wisdom and expertise, we carry in us and invest in every report our inheritances from them, including their visions of the USGS mission and the role of publishing in that mission.

At least three of us soon will be competing against private contractors, who may or may not have worked on USGS publications in their careers, for the jobs we've been doing, at least satisfactorily if not excellently, for decades. Many years ago but at different times, each of us was selected from a group of best applicants to do the work we do. When money has been available, we have continued training, and in the 93 years of accumulated experience, a good deal of on-the-job training has accrued. We are all still here, at the least because we've achieved satisfactory to outstanding performance appraisals once to twice a year and, at the most because we're proud of the reputation of USGS reports and committed to keeping it that way.

What is reasonable or cost-effective about scrapping-or even looking into scrapping this and other USGS units like us across the country?

Where will the loyalty as civil servants and concern for quality of reports be found among these new employees?

How long will it take for returns to match or outweigh the costs of scoping, studying, soliciting, analyzing, instating, and training new contractual employees?

Where will the institutional memory-local, regional, and national-be found among new employees? Who's going to know that, for instance-hey, Linda C. was here when Dick W. was sampling wells in that area for those constituents and she knows which reports came from that study and who took over Dick's work when he retired and where the working files are kept in the warehouse. Linda C. also would remember with whom Dick collaborated on the study, which agency cooperated on the study, and numerous other valuable details. Where is Linda C.?

What of the "brain drain" in federal government during the next ten years? I've read much lately about this reality. How can this be reconciled with the probable outcome of the competitive sourcing mandate?

The mandate for this unit, composed of experienced, conscientious, and dedicated professionals is an ill-conceived attempt to fix what isn't broken. Both in the short and long runs, this attempt will be costly-perhaps deadly-to the USGS in terms of dollars, in the quality of USGS reports, and, even if the MEO is selected in the end, in terms of employee morale and trust.

From the beginning of this process, employees have deserved better communication and better rationale behind that communication for what currently is taking place. Two truisms come to mind as I question the wholeness of thought that preceded and now accompanies this undertaking-first, that of Francis Bacon that, "There arises from a bad and unapt formation of words a wonderful obstruction to the mind." If this has not been the intention behind the communications, then another truism could apply: "The most devastating argument against a paper [competitive sourcing memo] that is marred by grammatical and rhetorical error is that the writer does not understand the subject." (Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner). Which truism applies here? The first would be dishonest and the second, unwitting. If the process has been thought through, where is the coherent explanation, the big picture, the desired consequences, the reasons that we should all be grateful that someone in charge has seen a better way?

Why haven't all employees, instead of only those directly affected in the short term-been kept abreast of the process? All employees will be affected-they are, in fact, affected right now. Keeping the profile low probably has avoided many complications. If that was the purpose, it probably has worked well, but is an approach not befitting the agency I thought I worked for.

My understanding-the best I can make of a host of some speculative, some half-baked, some bureaucratically (poorly) worded, some retracted and then reinstated and then re-retracted emails-of sourcing information that has come through official channels is that the USGS had a choice to continue or not to continue to pursue competitive sourcing for employees in Visual Information. My understanding is that someone, somewhere, somehow decided not to pull us out of that line headed toward the chopping block. Likened to a chess game strategy, the USGS strategy of subjecting Visual Information employees to competitive sourcing is the same as pulling the rooks out in the endgame and hoping to promote pawns to regain some competitive edge! When the competitive sourcing process for our unit is complete and some or most of us have lost our careers to new contract employees (the odds of staying employed in Visual Information with the USGS are, as best I can figure, less than 50 percent) -then the USGS will have something broken to fix.

Barbara Kemp
Technical Editor
U.S. Geological Survey, Idaho District
230 Collins Road, Boise, Idaho 83702
(208) 387-1311
bnkemp@usgs.gov