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DEFENSE SPACE ACTIVITIES

Management Actions Are Needed to Better Identify, Track, and Train Air Force Space Personnel

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-06-908, a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Defense (DOD) relies on space to support a wide range of vital military missions. Many factors contribute to DOD success in space activities, and having sufficient quantities of space-qualified personnel to design, oversee, and acquire space assets, on which DOD expects to spend about $20 billion in fiscal year 2007, is critical to DOD's ability to carry out its mission. The individual services are responsible for providing adequately qualified space personnel to meet mission needs. The Air Force provides over 90 percent of the space personnel to DOD's mission, but has not identified the space acquisition workforce. This report examines the extent to which (1) the Air Force's space acquisition workforce is managed using a strategic workforce management approach, (2) there are sufficient numbers of Air Force space acquisition personnel to meet DOD's national security needs, and (3) the Air Force's space acquisition personnel are adequately qualified for their positions. For its analysis, GAO identified the space acquisition workforce as those Air Force scientists, engineers, and program managers with experience developing space assets.

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes recommendations to DOD to take actions to better manage its limited pool of space acquisition personnel. DOD concurred or partially concurred with the recommendations. www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-908.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Davi M. D'Agostino at (202) 512-5431 or dagostinod@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

While DOD and the Air Force have not achieved consensus about whether the space acquisition workforce should have a designated career field or a separate workforce strategy, the Air Force is responsible for strategically managing this segment of its workforce as it has for other workforce groups, such as pilots and navigators. The Air Force has done needs assessments on certain segments of its space workforce, but has not done an integrated, zero-based needs assessment of its space acquisition workforce. Such a strategic assessment would help inform the Air Force's planned force reduction that will result in a decrease of 40,000 active personnel and a 25 percent reduction of contractor support over 5 years. However, the Air Force is not using a zero-based needs assessment that includes the entire space acquisition workforce—unclassified and classified programs and military, civilian, and contractor personnel—as part of its force reduction planning and process improvement efforts. Such an assessment would identify if there are skill and competency gaps. As a result, the Air Force may not be able to manage the impact of its force reductions on the space acquisition workforce or take actions to mitigate the impact to ensure this workforce meets national security space needs.

In the absence of an integrated, zero-based needs assessment of its space acquisition workforce and a career field specialty, the Air Force cannot ensure that it has enough space acquisition personnel or personnel who are technically proficient to meet national security space needs. The Air Force has a shortage of midgrade and senior officers who play vital management and oversight roles in space acquisition. At the Space and Missile Systems Center (SMC), 37 percent of the critical acquisition positions were vacant as of April 2006 and about 50 percent of the center's workload was being done by contractors. Also, the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) depends on Air Force personnel to fill many of its key space acquisition positions. Continuing shortages may hamper SMC's and NRO's ability to meet mission needs and highlight the Air Force's need to strategically manage its space acquisition workforce.

The technical proficiency of the Air Force's space acquisition workforce also may not be adequate to meet national security needs. At SMC, the percentage of space acquisition officers with the highest acquisition certification level dropped from 28 percent in 1996 to 15 percent in 2005. Reasons for the lower certification levels include NRO priority in selecting personnel, the lack of a space acquisition specialty, limited training, and the decline of personnel coming into the Air Force with technical degrees. Although required by law, the Air Force has not developed a career field for officers to develop space systems. Without a specialty to identify these personnel and increased space acquisition-related education and training, the Air Force may not be able to strategically manage its workforce and ensure personnel can effectively develop space systems.