



Congresswoman
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Press Release

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DELAURO ON USDA'S OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL

Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee Hearing

As Prepared for Delivery

First, I want to welcome today's speaker, Phyllis Fong, the Inspector General of the US Department of Agriculture. As you all know, Ms. Fong is the "senior official responsible for audits, evaluations, investigations, and law enforcement efforts relating to USDA's programs and operations," and the go-to official for dealing with questions of waste and fraud at the agency. As such, today counts among one of the more important hearings held by this subcommittee. Ms. Fong, thank you for joining us today and for providing your testimony.

Overall, it seems like OIG is doing a very good job of monitoring the expansive program areas at USDA. Since the start of fiscal year 2009, the USDA IG has issued nearly eighty audit reports on topics including ARRA oversight, food safety, organic products, animal fighting, public safety, and the integrity of numerous payment and loan programs. We here on the subcommittee rely very heavily on these IG reports to evaluate the successes and shortcomings of USDA programs.

And some of your findings over the past year have been eye-opening, to say the least. According to your reports, USDA is falling short in how it carries out a range of programs – including producer eligibility for financial support, the organic program and, perhaps most troubling, one of USDA's most solemn responsibilities, food safety.

On this latter front, IG reports have questioned the integrity of our food safety enforcement and even the very system we used to evaluate the success of food recalls. In addition, some long-standing problems – such as residues of pesticides, heavy metals, and antibiotics in our meat – continue to plague our public health and safety. And OIG has found that there is an across-the-board need to improve program administration, and a particular problem of coordination involving multi-agency initiatives.

So I hope that today we can talk through some of your findings, and also talk about ways to ensure that OIG's valuable recommendations are integrated into USDA operations. Implementation of your recommendations is as important as the studies themselves, and the Department must work hard to ensure that any systemic problems afflicting the department are addressed.

At a time of fiscal constraint, when we are working overtime to ensure that every penny in this coming budget is well-spent, the last thing that we want is to have you take the time and effort to produce these reports – and then have your recommendations and findings collect dust on a shelf somewhere while faulty programs continue.

With that in mind, I wanted to mention the staffing situation at OIG. The Fiscal Year 2011 budget before us proposes an appropriation of \$90.3 million for OIG, a 1.8%, or \$1.6 million dollar increase over last year's level, while the number of full-time equivalents at OIG will remain steady at the estimated 2010 level of 600.

After conducting some research, I discovered that, over the past thirty years since OIG was established, the number of FTEs in the office has gone from 970 in 1980 to 550 in 2009, a reduction of 43 percent. That is a lot of manpower to lose, and I want to make sure, Ms. Fong, that you feel that OIG still has the staff and resources in place to meet its critical obligations at the agency.

I say this because, as you know, USDA's programs are not only very wide-ranging but often extremely complex, and the OIG's office is fundamental to the Department's proper functioning.

With that in mind, Ms. Fong, I appreciate your dedication to the long-term strength and integrity of the agencies you review. As with previous years, I am sure that my colleagues and I will express great frustration at times today about problems at the Department. However, there is a recognition here that you are not the problem, and that you are testifying today simply to highlight these problem areas.

Thank you for the great work you do and for being here today. Mr. Kingston, would you like to make an opening statement?

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