

Capitol Connection

Report: Dept. of Energy should consolidate, close labs

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The Department of Energy should consider downsizing, consolidating, or closing national labs, according to [testimony](#) from the Department’s Inspector General to the House Science Subcommittee on Oversight. Gregory Friedman, the DOE Inspector General, originally proposed reforms to the national labs system two years ago, but the current fiscal climate led him to press for them again when he appeared before the House committee on March 14th. There are currently 17 national labs—including nuclear weapons centers like Los Alamos—that employ around 110,000 people as federal employees or contractors.

The DOE has an annual budget of roughly \$10 billion dollars to run the national labs, and \$3.5 billion of this goes to administrative overhead. According to Friedman, the “proportion of scarce science resources diverted to administrative, overhead, and indirect costs for each laboratory may be unsustainable in the current budget environment.” He proposes using the Department of Defense’s Base Closure and Realignment Commission (BRAC) as a model for streamlining the national lab system.

[BRAC](#) is a nonpartisan commission that has resulted in the closing or consolidation of many military bases and installations since the late 1980s. While Friedman states that such reorganization would “reduce indirect costs and, as a result, provide greater funds for science and research,” it is unclear what effect this restructuring would have on individual labs and scientists within the national labs—especially since Friedman did not make any specific recommendations. However, as [this article](#) points out, moving highly trained scientists from one lab to another may prove more difficult than reassigning military personnel.

Friedman also presented other cost-cutting measures in his testimony. These include decreasing the number of environmental cleanup efforts, which currently cost the DOE roughly \$6 billion each year. Friedman suggests a triage system that will fund “only high-risk activities that represent imminent or near term danger to health and safety, or further environmental degradation.” The Inspector General also recommends cutting redundant spending by the National Nuclear Security Administration and streamlining the administration of contracts for personnel who provide physical security for the DOE’s facilities (there are currently at least 25 different types of contracts for these workers).

So far, Friedman’s recommendations seem to have fallen on deaf ears. There has been some [pushback](#) from politicians, and neither the agency nor Congress appears eager to embrace the proposed changes.