

OPENING STATEMENT

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Subcommittee on Oversight
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

Is NSF Properly Managing Its Rotating Staff?
Joint Subcommittee Hearing

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The National Science Foundation (NSF) employs thousands of hard-working scientists and staff, many of whom live in my district. I value the tremendous benefit that the agency has brought to America and Americans over the past 65 years by supporting a wide range of scientific discoveries that have improved our understanding of every facet of the world around us.

As with any organization, public or private, problems sometimes emerge. Management improvements can be made and administrative oversight enhanced. Today's hearing will focus on the management and oversight of the NSF's "Rotator" program.

The NSF's rotator program, primarily Intergovernmental Personnel Act positions, allows non-federal employees from academic institutions and research labs to work at NSF for a temporary period of up to four years.

The advantage of this program is that it guarantees a continuous infusion of scholars at the forefront of their fields. This approach to staffing is similar to another program that has long been viewed as one of the most valuable in the U.S. government: the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. DARPA also relies on "rotators" to come in and manage research portfolios focused on innovative, emerging research.

While there are obvious benefits to this program, it is impossible to use such a system without running some risks. IPA staff are not necessarily trained managers, but fill professional staff positions. And NSF relies on the IPA program to fill positions far in excess of any other federal agency. This can cause some problems among the rank and file employees. IPA's also have not been brought up through the Civil Service ranks with an appreciation of the importance of avoiding conflicts of interest.

Each year, NSF provides around \$7 billion in grant awards and cooperative agreements to academic institutions. NSF is widely praised for the efficiency of its grants management system, and widely copied by foreign governments looking to spur creativity and innovation. However, when employees of grant-receiving institutions come to NSF on temporary assignment it is important that the Foundation routinely insure that each rotator is properly trained and monitored to insure they manage their portfolio wisely and in compliance with the law. The Foundation must take prompt steps to identify potential Conflicts-of-Interest and that rotators have the proper training to understand their obligations to avoid violating conflict of interest rules at the agency.

Today, we will hear from the NSF IG about a single rotator who failed to meet obligations for disclosing conflicts and for taking ethics training. The IG found that the individual was involved in three grant decisions where inappropriate ties to the grant recipient calls into question the integrity of the award.

It is hard to determine the degree to which this one failing represents systemic issues with the way NSF manages IPAs, or whether it is an unfortunate “one-off” failing. I agree with the IG that this incident points to broader management issues regarding NSF’s oversight of the rotator program and the recommendations contained in their report seem reasonable, and perhaps obviously overdue. I know NSF has not had much time to evaluate the specific recommendations, but I believe that where management problems exist they need to be quickly fixed. Where conflicts-of-interest emerge they need to be removed and rectified. The public has to have confidence that NSF is managing funds with absolute integrity.

These new recommendations regarding conflicts of interest policies join a standing list of other IG recommendations on the IPA program that were designed to control costs in those programs. While NSF has moved to put some of those changes in place, I am disappointed to learn that those reforms have been on a very, very slow track. Without endorsing any particular recommendation at this time, NSF should know that I expect its leadership to do more and more quickly in this area.

I believe the Rotator program as a whole can bring great benefit to NSF and to the federal government. The program helps to spark fresh and innovative ideas. It fosters collaboration between the federal government and America’s intellectually rich academic community. It improves the advancement of scientific discoveries and cutting edge technological developments in a wide range of subjects.

As we strive to promote greater economic efficiencies on the NSF rotator program and endeavor to enhance the agency’s administrative management and oversight of potential Conflicts of Interest I believe it is important to keep the benefits of the program in mind. One bad case does not a crisis make and the Committee would be well served to keep this in mind.

I look forward to hearing from our two witnesses both about the issues that have been identified and the actions that have been taken to correct them.

Thank you very much. With that I yield back.