

Coburn Amendment #559- To eliminate program duplication, fragmentation, and overlap within the 94 “green building” programs

Background: In 2012, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found the federal government is operating 94 programs within 11 Departments aimed at promoting “green building.” These duplicative programs have an unknown cost, and it is unknown whether or not they are effective because they do not have performance measures in place.

This amendment allows the appropriate committees to reduce the deficit through eliminating, consolidating, or reforming duplicative green building programs and initiatives outlined in GAO’s annual report to reduce program duplication. This amendment allows the committees to streamline and reform green building programs and initiatives to increase efficiency, ensure these programs are effectively meeting goals, and reduce the deficit.

GAO Found “green building” programs within the following Departments and Agencies:

Department of Agriculture, 8 programs

Department of Defense, 1 program

Department of Education, 2 programs

Department of Energy, 17 programs

Department of Health and Human Services, 1 program

Department of Housing and Urban Development, 29 programs

Department of Transportation, 5 programs

Department of the Treasury, 8 programs

Environmental Protection Agency, 18 programs

National Institute of Standards and Technology, 3 programs

Small Business Administration, 2 programs

GAO’s report highlighted:

No definition of what green building: There is no generally accepted definition for green building, but GAO suggests that it generally includes one or more of the following elements:

- energy conservation or efficiency measures

- indoor environmental quality measures
- water conservation or efficiency measures
- integrated design principles
- sustainable siting or location measures
- measures to reduce the environmental impact of materials

Due to the lack of a standard definition for green building, several different regional and national standards for builders and developers are used to certify whether a particular building is a green building. One of the more popular standards is the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) system which was developed and administered by the U.S. Green Building Council.

94 duplicative programs: The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was created “to consolidate in one agency a variety of federal research, monitoring, standard-setting and enforcement activities to ensure environmental protection” yet, GAO reported finding 94 initiatives, operated through 11 agencies, promoting green building. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Department of Energy operate two-thirds of the green building programs. Forty-seven of the programs are grants, 9 programs provide loans, 5 offer tax credits, three offer tax deductions, and 45 initiatives offer technical assistance.

Unknown cost to the federal government: The agencies running the green building programs do not keep track of green building funds which makes it impossible to determine the cost of these programs.

Unknown results: Only about a third of the programs have goals and performance measures in place, “therefore, the results of most initiatives and their related investments in green building are unknown.” GAO reported that “leading organizations commonly define clear goals and related outcomes, measure performance to gauge progress, and use performance information to assess the results of their efforts and the related investment.” “Agencies and programs working collaboratively can often achieve more public value than when they work in isolation.”¹

¹ GAO-12-342SP: 2012 Annual Report: Opportunities to Reduce Duplication, Overlap and Fragmentation, Achieve Savings, and Enhance Revenue. Government Accountability Office. February 2012.