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Senate investigating complaints of harassment of whistleblowers

Scripps Howard News

WASHINGTON — A Senate subcommittee is investigating 14 complaints about inspectors general at 11 federal agencies abusing their power and harassing whistleblowers.

The governmental affairs subcommittee on general services, headed by Sen. Jim Sasser, D-Tenn., is planning a hearing in October to explore the complaints, including one that some agency problems are ignored to protect top-level managers from embarrassment.

Sasser also is considering reforms of the federal system of 28 offices of inspectors general, which are supposed to investigate federal waste, fraud and mismanagement.

"It appears in many instances," Sasser said, "that inspectors general — instead of being agency watchdogs — have become nothing more than agency lapdogs."

The 14 complaints under review by the subcommittee generally involve inspectors general harassing agency whistleblowers rather than investigating the problems.

The offices of inspectors general were created as independent watchdogs who are appointed by the president. In each major agency, there is one such office.

But Sasser aide James Pratt said there is concern now that IGs have "insider connections" in departments or agencies and are sometimes worried only about "damage control" for the executives of the party in power.

Inspectors general or their investigators from the following federal agencies or departments are under review by the panel: Department of Energy, Health and Human Services Department, State Department, Environmental Protection Agency, Agriculture Department, Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of the Interior, two agencies of the Department of Defense, General Services Administration, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

The subcommittee has not completed its investigation and is not ready to discuss details of the allegations, Pratt said. However, some of the IGs are accused of trying to punish whistleblowers by revealing their identities to supervisors.

Sasser also is chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, so he plans to finish the 1991 budget talks before setting a firm date for the October hearing on IGs.

Navy sub blamed for sinking tug boat

Press news services

WASHINGTON — Safety investigators put some of the blame on the U.S. Navy for a bizarre accident last year in which a nuclear submarine waiting to play a role in "The Hunt for Red October" snagged the tow line of a tug boat and sunk it.

The National Transportation Safety Board said the June 4, 1989, accident off southern California occurred partly because the Navy's policy governing how submerged submarines should operate in crowded waters is unclear.

One tug crew member died in the accident, which occurred in the predawn darkness and fog between Los Angeles-Long Beach Harbor and Santa Catalina Island.

The tug, the Barcona, was towing two empty barges from Long Beach to Santa Catalina. The USS Houston, in the area to participate in the filming later in the day of scenes for "The Hunt for Red October," was underwater at periscope depth. The sub extended its antenna to obtain a navigational fix when the antenna caught the Barcona's tow line.

The tow line did not break, instead, the submarine pulled the barges and the tug by the snagged line. The tug moved backwards, water washed over its low stern, and within seconds it sank.

The NTSB said Navy submarines use a variety of procedures to ensure that other vessels are at a safe distance when periscopes and antennas are raised above the water line.

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