

USDA Shuts Down Congressional Audit

By BEN EVANS – 1 day ago

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Agriculture Department abruptly ordered congressional auditors to leave its headquarters and told its employees not to cooperate with them.

"You are hereby instructed not to meet with any member of the (Government Accountability Office) today, or until this matter is resolved," Michael Watts, a top USDA attorney, wrote to employees Wednesday in an e-mail obtained by The Associated Press.

The auditors were seeking information for an ongoing audit on Agriculture's office of civil rights and its handling of discrimination complaints. Specifically, they were investigating allegations that the department had previously provided false information for the audit.

J. Michael Kelly, Agriculture's deputy general counsel, said the GAO investigators called the department Wednesday morning to say they were on their way to its headquarters and wanted to speak with a handful of specific employees.

The auditors refused to allow USDA lawyers to be present for the interviews, and after allowing one employee to talk, department officials stopped the interviews and told the investigators to leave the building, Kelly said.

"We are not interested in having our employees potentially put themselves at risk when they have not yet been advised of their rights and when we were not allowed to provide counsel," Kelly said. "We also pointed out to them that while they hold themselves out to be criminal investigators, GAO is an arm of Congress and has no authority to investigate violations of criminal law."

Kelly said the department has been cooperating with the auditors for a year but will not allow its employees to discuss the matter until it gets more information.

"We don't have anything to hide," Kelly said. "We have absolutely no understanding of why anybody at GAO believes there's been any misrepresentation."

A spokesman for GAO, the investigative arm of Congress, said the agency could not immediately comment on the matter.

John Boyd, a Virginia farmer who for years has criticized the Agriculture Department on civil rights issues, said the development shows that the department is not open about its handling of civil rights complaints.

"We think it's appalling that the USDA would go this far to obstruct civil rights," he said. "It's obvious that they have something to hide."

Although executive agencies frequently chafe at GAO's findings, the agency has a reputation as an independent, nonpartisan investigative office.

The agency has clashed with the Bush administration, however, most notably in 2002 when it sued Vice President Dick Cheney to get the names of energy executives who met with a White House task force working on President Bush's energy policy. The lawsuit marked the first time in the GAO's nearly 90-year history that it had resorted to asking a federal judge to force a president or vice president or their aides to release documents.

The GAO lost the case.