

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

REPORT ON AUDIT OF ACQUISITION OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
AT AMES LABORATORY

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REPORT ON AUDIT OF ACQUISITION OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
AT AMES LABORATORY

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL
OFFICE OF AUDIT SERVICES

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REPORT ON AUDIT OF ACQUISITION OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
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Audit Report Number: ER-B-95-05

July 14, 1995

SUMMARY

The Department awards grants and cooperative agreements (cooperative agreements) and contracts to sponsor scientific research at colleges and universities. Compared to cooperative agreements, contracts, particularly management and operating contracts, often impose duplicative and/or unnecessary administrative and compliance burdens on a college or university. Since the Department bears the cost of those additional burdens, we audited the cost effectiveness of the Department's sponsorship of research at Ames Laboratory under a management and operating contract with Iowa State University.

The research conducted at Ames is of the type that Congress intended to be sponsored by assistance agreements, rather than contracts. Moreover, we found the contract for managing and operating Ames Laboratory caused micromanagement and unnecessary costs, most of which could have been avoided with a cooperative agreement. However, after completion of our field work, the Department announced initiatives to reduce or eliminate some compliance and oversight burdens associated with management and operating contracts, but did not opt to sponsor research under cooperative agreements. We are unable to determine the monetary impact because the initiatives have not been implemented. Nevertheless, we continue to believe that cooperative agreements, having fewer unique bureaucratic requirements, offer the potential for reducing administrative overhead.

Management concurred with the intent of our recommendation to find lower cost contractual alternatives for the operation of Ames Laboratory. The Chicago Operations has begun to determine the impact of alternative contractual vehicles. Part III of this report discusses management's comments.

Office of Inspector General

PART I

APPROACH AND OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Energy has sponsored scientific research at Ames Laboratory since 1947 under a series of contracts. The most recent contract was awarded in 1989. The audit objective was to determine whether the sponsorship of research at Ames Laboratory under a management and operating contract with Iowa State University (Iowa State) was cost effective when compared to cooperative agreements.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The audit was performed in December 1994 at Ames Laboratory, which is located on the Iowa State campus in Ames, Iowa. Ames Laboratory is operated by Iowa State under a management and operating contract awarded by the Chicago Operations Office. The following specific methodologies were used:

- o Examined applicable Departmental orders and directives;
- o Reviewed pertinent provisions in the Department's management and operating contract with Iowa State for the operation of Ames Laboratory;
- o Interviewed Departmental, Iowa State and Ames Laboratory managers and scientists to gain an understanding of organizational relationships, staffing, administrative requirements, oversight responsibilities and the approach to the conduct of scientific research under contracts, grants, and cooperative agreements; and
- o Discussed the nature of the sponsored research at Ames Laboratory with Chicago Operations Office, as well as Headquarters Energy Research and Waste Management officials to the extent necessary to facilitate comparison of contract and financial assistance requirements.

The audit was made according to generally accepted Government auditing standards for performance audits and included tests of internal controls and compliance with laws and regulations to the extent necessary to satisfy the audit objective. Because our review was limited, it would not necessarily have disclosed all internal control deficiencies that may have existed at the time of our audit.

Management waived the official exit conference on this audit.

BACKGROUND

Ames Laboratory is a Government-owned research facility

collocated with Iowa State. Established in 1947 as a result of the Manhattan Project, Ames Laboratory performs basic research in materials and chemical sciences and related research in materials reliability and nondestructive evaluation. Ames Laboratory employs 342 people, and has an annual operating budget of about \$40 million. Ames Laboratory maintains a separate administrative support organization which includes accounting, budgeting, and purchasing departments. The current management and operating contract between Iowa State and the Chicago Operations Office expires in December 1996.

Although legally distinct entities, Ames Laboratory and Iowa State closely collaborate in research activities through faculty appointments, graduate student training, faculty sharing programs, and undergraduate and faculty summer research programs, etc. Ames Laboratory maintains capabilities for preparing high purity metals, alloys, compounds and single crystals. It also sustains additional capabilities in high energy physics, nuclear physics, applied mathematics and engineering, and environmental and coal preparation sciences.

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

We believe Congress intended that the type research being performed at Ames Laboratory be sponsored under a financial assistance instrument rather than under a management and operating contract. Moreover, the present contract for the management and operation of Ames Laboratory caused unnecessary and/or duplicative administrative support and oversight activities. For example, under the management and operating contract, Ames Laboratory maintained an administrative organization (accounting, budgeting, personnel, etc.) duplicative of Iowa State's. Further, contract terms required Ames Laboratory to implement several Department management systems (such as a specialized accounting system) and caused Ames Laboratory employees to annually spend about 3,000 hours preparing recurring compliance reports for the Department. Also, by using the management and operating contract, the Department increased Federal administrative involvement by: (1) 140 staff days annually to review and appraise Ames Laboratory's operating systems, and (2) two Chicago Operations Office employees who were assigned to contract administration.

Recent changes in the Department's procurement philosophy for laboratories are expected to reduce the number of compliance requirements and limit Federal administrative involvement. However, implementing these changes would probably not significantly change the contractor's organizational structure. Using a cooperative agreement in lieu of the existing management and operating contract would eliminate administrative duplication with Iowa State, reduce DOE mandated systems at Ames Laboratory, and minimize Federal employee administrative involvement.

FINDING AND RECOMMENDATION

Sponsorship of Scientific Research at Ames Laboratory

FINDING

The Federal Grant and Cooperative Agreement Act requires that public purpose research be acquired by grants or cooperative agreements. Cooperative agreements, as opposed to management and operating contracts, offer significant cost advantages because such agreements generally avoid duplicating support functions and impose fewer administrative requirements at both the laboratory and the Federal level. However, the Department has sponsored research at Ames Laboratory under a management and operating contract which resulted in:

- o Duplicative administrative support, such as a separate purchasing department;
- o Unnecessary activities, such as a Department-mandated accounting system; and
- o Substantial Federal employee administrative involvement.

The Department has sponsored research at Ames Laboratory since 1947, but has not fully considered the advantages of acquiring research under one or more cooperative agreements. Consequently, the Department has spent substantial funds for administrative support and oversight that otherwise could have been directed to actual research, or avoided altogether.

RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that the Manager, Chicago Operations Office, sponsor scientific research under cooperative agreements with Iowa State instead of a management and operating contract.

MANAGEMENT REACTION

The Chicago Operations Office expressed agreement with the intent of our recommendation and has initiated a study of contractual alternatives, including a cooperative agreement and a reformed management and operating contract.

DETAILS OF FINDING

MORE DOLLARS FOR RESEARCH USING COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS

The Federal Grant and Cooperative Agreement Act of 1977 provides that an agency must use a procurement contract if its principal purpose is to acquire property or services for the direct benefit or use of the Federal Government. Conversely, an agency must use an assistance agreement (e.g., cooperative

COSTS COULD BE AVOIDED

The Department has acknowledged that certain costs associated with a management and operating contract pertaining to complying with directives have been incurred. Currently, the Department is eliminating, consolidating and streamlining directives for management and operating contractors and the outcome is projected to produce savings or cost avoidances in contractor and Federal compliance and oversight activities. At present, the effort is underway with no accurate measurement of these savings. While these initiatives are laudable, they do not appear to address a fundamental issue of using the most appropriate and cost-effective method of acquiring research at laboratories.

We are unable to precisely quantify the overall cost savings or avoidance by acquiring scientific research at Ames Laboratory with cooperative agreements versus a management and operating contract. However, we do believe realization of substantial cost benefits is achievable. One such example would be the elimination of Federal oversight estimated at approximately \$195,000 annually. The savings could better be used to conduct additional research at Ames Laboratory, other research institutions, or could be avoided altogether.

PART III

Management and Auditor Comments

The Manager, Chicago Operations Office, commented on the revised initial draft version of this report and concurred, in principle, with the recommendation for acquiring scientific research at Ames Laboratory at a lower cost. Management and auditor comments follow.

Management Comments. We agree with the principle of finding lower cost contractual alternatives for our Ames operation. We are committed to achieving cost effective operations while maintaining the scientific excellence of the Ames Laboratory. Consequently, we have initiated a study to determine the cost impact of alternative contractual vehicles, including both a cooperative agreement and a reformed M&O contract.

As part of our study, several of our staff members met with both Ames Laboratory and Iowa State University (ISU) representatives in order to obtain financial data. Although we received some of the data we requested, both Ames Laboratory and ISU need additional time to analyze and submit the requested data. Upon receipt and analysis of this data, we will discuss our conclusions with our Energy Research and Environmental Management customers. Subsequent to this we will prepare a report that contains our final conclusions. We expect to complete this study and to prepare a coordinated cost reduction plan based on the findings by September 1, 1995. We will send you a copy of this report.

Auditor Comments. The corrective actions taken and planned are responsive to the intent of the recommendation. We will, however, continue to monitor the study's progress and plan to review management's report on their final conclusions.

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