

OSHA Braces for Budget Cuts in 2011 VPP Could Be Most Vulnerable Program

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration is expecting cuts to its fiscal 2011 budget, meaning all of its programs will have to be scaled back, Jordan Barab, the agency's deputy head, said at a Dec. 4 luncheon of the American National Standards Institute.

Barab did not estimate the magnitude of the cuts or identify programs most likely to be pared back, but did say he hoped no OSHA programs would have to be eliminated, a source who attended the luncheon told BNA Dec. 7.

Baruch Fellner, a partner with the law firm of Gibson, Dunn, and Crutcher, said OSHA's voluntary programs are likely to be high on the list of vulnerable programs.

"I have always been concerned about the future of voluntary compliance programs under this administration," Fellner told BNA Dec. 7. "Cutting back on VPP and eliminating alliances and partnerships would not surprise me at all. I believe them when they say there's a new sheriff in town, and sheriffs generally don't make nice."

Peg Seminario, safety and health director at AFL-CIO, said OSHA must review and prioritize the programs that are most essential to protecting workers.

"There's never been a full evaluation of the Voluntary Protection Program," Seminario said. "There are certainly companies participating in that program that are doing a good job, but we don't know. And this agency is a small agency. It doesn't have many resources, and while there are other groups out there that get engaged in voluntary efforts, OSHA is the only one that does enforcement. So they have a responsibility to make sure they are using the people and staff they have as effectively as they can."

No Intention for VPP Elimination

In his remarks, Barab said he had eliminated the agency's annual quotas for enrolling employers in the Voluntary Protection Program, but that he did not intend to signal any intention to eliminate it altogether.

In a Sept. 25 speech before the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO, Barab said he had "nothing against recognizing those companies that go above and beyond minimum health and safety standards," but that, "in a time of scarce resources, this administration will put its energy and resources into those companies that need the most help and attention, not those already doing well on their own" ([39 OSHR 830, 10/1/09](#)).

President Obama has said he will look to trim federal agencies' budgets in 2011 to reduce the deficit. The budget will be released in February.

Also during his luncheon speech, Barab said 100 new inspectors will be hired next year.

OSHA also plans to hold a conference in 2010 on immigrant workers and day laborers, Barab said.