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Democrats Say Homeland Security Budget Is Lean Enough; GOP Seeks More Cuts

By Tim Starks, CQ Staff

Democratic appropriators and the Homeland Security secretary said Wednesday that GOP-proposed cutbacks to department funding would dramatically diminish defenses against terrorism, even as Republicans insisted that all parts of the federal government need reductions to address a crushing deficit.

“This is not the time to cut back on homeland security” given recent attempted terrorist attacks, Democratic Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg of New Jersey said at a hearing of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security. “I recognize that we have serious fiscal challenges in our country, but you can’t put a price on a human life.”

The top Republican on the panel, Dan Coats of Indiana, said that everyone in the United States is facing budget pressure, and the federal government shouldn’t be excused. “Everyone has to do more for less,” he said. “We need a more efficient government.”

At a separate hearing Wednesday, the chairman of the House Appropriations Homeland Security panel, Alabama Republican Robert B. Aderholt, said: “We must find a way to balance our limited resources across our competing priorities and numerous vulnerabilities in order to confront every threat with tenacity and purpose.”

The Senate hearing, meant to focus on President Obama’s fiscal 2012 budget proposal, instead was dominated by exchanges between Democratic appropriators and Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano on one side, and GOP senators on the other, over the House-passed spending measure (HR 1) that would cover the rest of fiscal 2011.

Napolitano said that bill’s reductions from the president’s original fiscal 2011 request would have serious effects. Those include the inability to deploy 250 of 500 full-body scanning machines to airports; a two-thirds cut to canine teams, which would mean longer security lines at airports; 250 fewer Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, which Napolitano said would mean less border security; and a science and technology wing that would be halved, meaning less research into technologies that would alleviate the need for airline passengers to remove their shoes or limits on how much liquid they can carry on to a plane.

Coats said the department should decide what programs are absolutely essential and what it can live without, although Napolitano said the department already had done that for the fiscal 2012 proposal. Coats replied that every department would say it had cut as much as it could, but “no one is going to get everything they would like to get.”

Mary L. Landrieu, the Louisiana Democrat who chairs the subcommittee, said the department was at a fragile state in its development, since it was only created in 2002 and amounted to a massive government reorganization. “We need to be mindful that we are still building this agency,” she said. “That takes investments and resources.”

Coats also raised concerns about the department's assumption that Congress would agree to an increase in the airline passenger security fee of \$1.50, an amount expected to generate \$590 million. Napolitano said that if the fee is not agreed to, it would result in even deeper cuts across the department.

Napolitano said in prepared testimony that the fee has not changed since right after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, and that the cost of aviation security has risen by 400 percent.

Republicans on the House panel challenged Napolitano further on the fee proposal. Every Homeland Security secretary, said Harold Rogers of Kentucky, chairman of the full Appropriations Committee, has proposed a fee increase, "knowing Congress is not going to do it. And we won't do it."

Napolitano said she had been talking with authorizing committees to seek their approval for the fee increase, and criticized Rogers' rejection of it. "In this fiscal environment, everything deserves a fresh look," she said.

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