US geological research

Asset-stripping fear at survey*Washington*

It has been a long, hot summer for the US Geological Survey (USGS) the United States' oldest basic research agency. A chain of decisions by the controversial US Secretary of the Interior, James Watt — that stem from a scandal in one part of the survey dating back to 1959 — had led by 1 October to the departure of approximately 2,400 people, including the entire Conservation Division and a third of USGS's marine geology research, to a new agency in charge of leasing federal lands, the Minerals Management Service (MMS).

One survey scientist describes his organization now as "a car going down the street and someone takes a wheel off". By October, Dallas Peck, the director of the survey who is one of its career scientists, had adroitly negotiated with Watt, who is his boss, to minimize the damage to the survey as a research institution, and cut back the "raid" of marine geology from Watt's original plans.

The loss of only a third of the marine geology group was considered a triumph of sorts by survey scientists who, over the summer, had been comparing departure plans. Morale was described as good, even though rumours were still circulating that Watt might now also ask the coal and marine scientists at the survey to come over to the politically-led MMS.

USGS conducts basic geological research, but since the nineteenth century it has also had some applied missions. The most important of these, in recent years, has been to make geological assessments of federal and Indian lands, both in the "lower 48" states and in Alaska, and of the enormous US continental shelf. These assessments are used by another agency of the Interior Department, the Bureau of Land Management, to second-guess oil and minerals company bids to explore and develop these lands, and for devising overall policies on which lands should be developed. USGS had the job of determining the "fair market value" of the lands and of specific tracts, to make sure the government made the corporations offer high enough royalties to flow to the federal and state coffers.

Both these tasks have been intensely controversial, and pitted the Interior Department, the Bureau of Land Management, the government, the companies, the environmentalists and the Indian tribes against each other in a fashion that makes the development of the North Sea and northern Canada look orderly by comparison.

The misnamed Conservation Division of USGS had the job of regulation, including royalty collection. Geologists in the Geologic Division, which includes the marine geologists, dealt with resource assessment and determining fair market

value.

Over the years, many lands were leased for oil and mineral development in the Western states, and after the discovery of oil at Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, and the 1973 oil embargo, the leasing of lands grew, as did royalties. The Conservation Division did not have the manpower to handle these tasks. When Watt took office in early 1981, he unearthed a series of old General Accounting Office reports dating back to 1959, claiming USGS had failed to collect enough money.

Watt appointed a commission, headed by a businessman, David F. Linowes, to look into the loss of revenues. In January 1982, acting on the Linowes Commission report, he decided to transfer the handling of royalties to a new agency, the Minerals Management Service. But he went further than the Linowes commission and moved the entire Conservation Division — approximately 2,200 people — to make the bulk of the new MMS. MMS would handle the assessment, leasing and royalties collection for offshore lands, as well as the assessment, monitoring and royalties collection of onshore lands. Its powers over the onshore lands may yet be increased.

The transfer of the Conservation Division in January made big cuts in USGS, which had 10,000 full-time positions, and a budget proposed at \$516 million. But it was considered by many to be an appropriate streamlining of the offshore leasing process, which had hitherto required many different agencies (or as one source says "35 people in the room with Watt") to coordinate in order to issue a single lease.

Far more controversial was another directive — a surprise to USGS and, apparently, to its director, Peck — that Watt sent in May asking that the Marine Geology Division, which makes offshore resource assessments, should also move over to MMS. Although the marine geology work consists of only 442 full-time positions and funding of \$22 million, the division considers itself part of the scientific heart of the survey. Everyone was upset at the thought of these people, who pride themselves on being as good as university professors, working for the political MMS, which is run by Harold E. Doley Jr, a 35-year-old black Louisiana stockbroker who had helped get southern black votes for Reagan in 1980.

"All of a sudden, MMS would acquire all those ships and photographic equipment and scientists who were more senior than most of the personnel of MMS" comments one survey scientist — indicating the shock caused by Watt's memorandum.

Peck, however (who could not be reached for interview), took the blow in his

stride, and argued that the agency was stronger. To his staff, in May, he said that "the focus of our activities is now even more clearly upon the scientific and technical aspects of our mission . . . It is now our responsibility to assure that we continue to earn the confidence which the secretary has placed in us. This will require that we look carefully at everything we are doing to ensure that our actions are responsible to the department's goals."

Peck negotiated with his bosses at the Interior Department all summer, and by the summer's end had reached an agreement by which only those marine geologists who really were involved in resource assessment and applied jobs would leave the survey for MMS. Finally, only 147 positions and \$8 million left the programme. According to an earlier plan, marine geology was merged with energy, within the Geologic Division.

Harold Doley Jr — MMS director

Watt explained to a group of visitors to the White House a few weeks ago his belief that the government must facilitate the orderly development of the country's mineral and energy resources to avoid a "panic" rush to develop them in the twenty-first century.

The controversy, and continuing fear of another Watt raid on other researchers, has been high drama for the Geological Survey, which enjoyed a carefully nurtured respectable obscurity around Washington. But there are more important issues at stake, namely whether assessment should be carried out within a scientific agency if it is to preserve its integrity.

One commonly expressed fear is that MMS will be so anxious to respond to Watt's wishes that it will undervalue the tracts and not require high enough bids from industry — thus depriving federal and state governments of revenue. It will be some time before it can be determined if this major shift in science policy is a mistake, and loses the taxpayer money. If it does, it will be an ironic outcome for a process that began by trying to recoup funds for the public purse.

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