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Acquisition Work Forces May Merge

By David Phinney

Tens of thousands of employees in acquisition and procurement at the Defense Department could be reorganized into one corps as soon as next year under legislation signed into law Nov. 24 by President Bush.

The fiscal 2004 Defense Authorization Act grants new flexibility to the Defense Department in managing and promoting its acquisition workers. Those changes allow for dismantling various acquisition work forces at Defense agencies and the military services and recombining them into one single acquisition corps.

When and if a consolidation will take place will be decided in the coming months, said Pentagon spokesman Glenn Flood.

"We are just now starting to talk with the services on this," Flood said.

Proposals for creating a single acquisition work force have been circulating for more than two decades. One longtime suggestion calls for taking the estimated 20,000 acquisition contract officers working at each of the armed services and Defense agencies and reassigning them to a single organization. Another could total over 200,000 by including auditors, quality assurance officers and others, said Stan Soloway, deputy undersecretary for acquisition reform at the Defense Department during the Clinton administration.

"Pulling those people together would be a mammoth task," said Soloway, who is now president of the Professional Services Council, which represents government contractors. "Each service has its own culture. It would take some adjusting."

Proponents say the benefits of consolidating the acquisition workers into a single work force would enhance Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's transformation agenda and the goal of achieving greater efficiency and cost savings. Acquisitions ranging from weapons programs to technology and even staple goods could further the integration of all the services.

Other provisions affecting Defense acquisition employees give the department more authority to establish levels of experience, education and tenure as a way to streamline the hiring and promoting of acquisition professionals.