

USGS Coalition

Testimony of the USGS Coalition
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Regarding the U.S. Geological Survey
FY 2009 Budget Request

To the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
March 13, 2008

Summary

The USGS Coalition appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony in support of increased appropriations for the United States Geological Survey (USGS) for fiscal year (FY) 2009. We continue to believe that the USGS budget request is below the amount required to ensure the long-term vitality of the agency. The USGS Coalition urges Congress to increase the budget of the U.S. Geological Survey to \$1.3 billion in FY 2009.

The USGS Coalition is an alliance of 70 organizations united by a commitment to the continued vitality of the unique combination of biological, geographical, geological, and hydrological programs of the United States Geological Survey. The Coalition supports increased federal investment in USGS programs that underpin responsible natural resource stewardship, improve resilience to natural and human-induced hazards, and contribute to the long-term health, security and prosperity of the nation.

The USGS plays a crucial role in protecting the public from natural hazards such as floods and earthquakes, assessing water quality, providing emergency responders with geospatial data to improve homeland security, analyzing the strategic and economic implications of mineral supply and demand, and providing the science needed to manage our natural resources and combat invasive species that can threaten agriculture and public health. The USGS is working in every state and has nearly 400 offices across the country. To aid in its interdisciplinary investigations, the USGS works with over 2,000 federal, state, local, tribal and private organizations.

Funding Shortfall

The President's FY 2009 budget request for the USGS is \$969 million, which is \$38 million or 4 percent below the FY 2008 enacted budget. The USGS budget has declined in real dollars for seven consecutive years and it would decline for an eighth year if the FY 2009 budget request were enacted (Figure 1).

In real terms, funding for the USGS is currently at its lowest level since FY 1996, when the National Biological Service was integrated into the USGS (Figure 1). The decline in funding for the USGS during this time period would have been greater if Congress had not repeatedly restored proposed budget cuts. By contrast, overall federal funding for research and development has increased significantly in real terms since FY 1996.

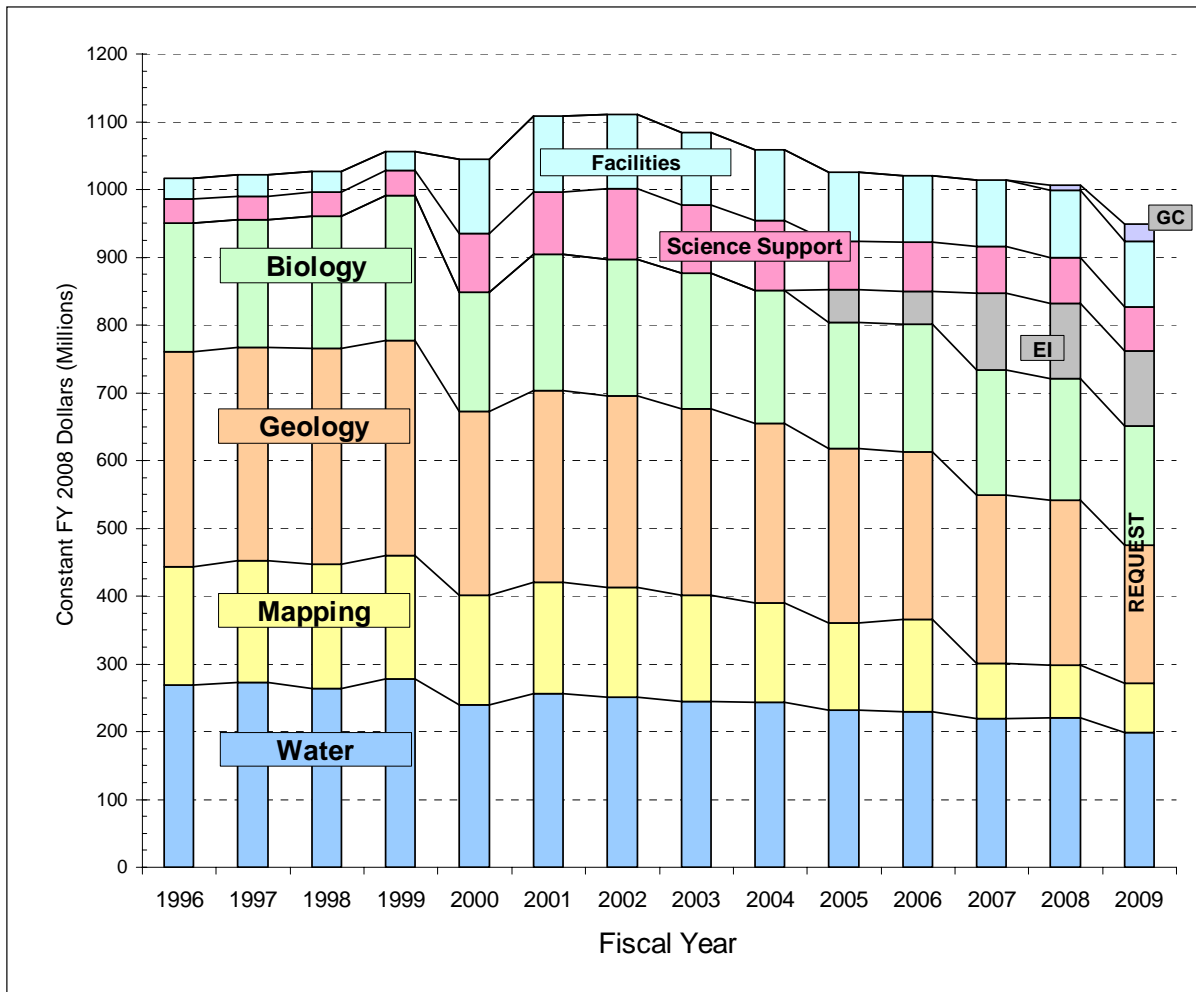


Figure 1. USGS funding in constant dollars, FY 1996 – FY 2009. EI is Enterprise Information and GC is Global Change. Source: USGS Budget Office.

Over the past several years, natural hazards have negatively affected communities across the country, including flash floods and forest fires in California, and hurricanes in Florida and the Gulf Coast region. Forest fires burned a total of 9,321,326 acres of land in the United States in 2007. These fires are not limited to western states. Virginia experienced a 16 percent rise in wildfires. Since an earthquake generated a tsunami that caused approximately 230,000 fatalities near the Indian Ocean in 2004, people around the globe have a greater awareness and appreciation of the need to improve environmental monitoring, forecasting, and warning systems that can prevent natural hazards from becoming natural disasters

Providing the information necessary to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters is a core function of the USGS. It operates seismic networks and conducts seismic hazard analyses that are used to formulate earthquake probabilities and to establish building codes across the nation. The USGS monitors volcanoes and provides warnings about impending eruptions. Data from the USGS network of stream gages enables the National Weather Service to issue flood warnings. The USGS and its Federal partners monitor seasonal wildfires, provide maps of current fire locations and the potential spread of fires. Research on ecosystem structure and function assists forest and

rangeland managers with forecasting fire risk and managing natural systems following fires. The USGS plays a pivotal role in reducing risks from floods, wildfires, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, landslides and other natural hazards that jeopardize human lives and cost billions of dollars in damages every year.

Equally important, the USGS plays a critical role in bioinformatics and managing natural resources, essential to our economy, security, and environment. Baseline data about our nation's biology and how it is changing is needed to understand and address climate change. The USGS provides fundamental scientific data that informs management of natural resources (*e.g.*, data for Fish and Wildlife Service on polar bear populations), control of invasive species (*e.g.*, snakehead fish, zebra mussels, and tamarisk) and monitoring of wildlife diseases (*e.g.*, Highly Pathogenic Avian Flu, Chronic Wasting Disease) that can cause billions of dollars in agricultural losses.

The USGS is uniquely positioned to address many of the nation's environmental and security challenges, including energy independence, climate change, water quality, and conservation of biological diversity. Efforts to make the nation more energy-independent requires recurring USGS assessments of previously unexploited mineral and emerging energy resources, including geothermal resources, and renewable energy sources such as biofuels.

USGS research that spans the biological, geological, geographical, and hydrological sciences are essential for understanding potential impacts that could result from global climate change or from land management practices. These studies provide critical information for resource managers as they develop adaptive management strategies for restoration and long-term use of the nation's natural resources.

Greater investment in the USGS is required. This investment could be used to strengthen USGS partnerships, improve monitoring networks, produce high-quality digital geospatial data and deliver the best possible science to address societal problems and inform decision-makers.

USGS Budget Request

The USGS Coalition urges Congress to increase the budget of the U.S. Geological Survey to \$1.3 billion in FY 2009, which is necessary for the agency to continue providing critical information to the public and to decision-makers at all levels of government. The budget increase recommended by the Coalition would enable the USGS to restore the science cuts proposed in the budget request (*e.g.*, substantial reductions in the Mineral Resources program, Water Resources Research Institutes, National Water-Quality Assessment Program, earthquake hazards research grants, Toxic Substances Hydrology program, and National Biological Information Infrastructure), accelerate the timetable for deployment of critical projects (*e.g.*, the National Streamflow Information Program and the multi-hazards initiative), and launch science initiatives that address new challenges.

The President's FY 2009 budget request would cut funding for the USGS by approximately \$38 million or 4 percent to \$969 million compared with the FY 2008 enacted budget of \$1.006 billion. The USGS budget request would provide funding for several initiatives, including Water

for America, Ocean and Coastal Frontiers, Healthy Lands, and Birds Forever. These initiatives deserve the support of Congress.

The USGS budget request would cut \$24.6 million from the Mineral Resources program, a decrease of 48 percent that would decimate the program and necessitate buyouts of hundreds of federal workers. The budget request would also eliminate all funding (\$6.3 million) for the Water Resources Research Institutes, which are located in all 50 states. Congress has repeatedly rejected similar proposed cuts to these programs in recent years and we urge Congress to reject these proposed cuts again this year.

The President's budget request for FY 2009 also proposes large cuts in other programs, including a \$9.8 million reduction in the National Water-Quality Assessment Program, a \$3 million cut in extramural research grants on earthquake hazards, a \$3 million reduction in the Toxic Substances Hydrology program, and a \$2.9 million cut in the National Biological Information Infrastructure (NBII). The proposed cut in the NBII would result in a 70 percent reduction over three years, significantly impairing the agency's core capacity to provide access to high quality, integrated biological data that informs resource management decisions. The budget request also includes many smaller budget cuts. We encourage Congress to restore these cuts, but this funding should not come at the expense of other high priority programs elsewhere in the USGS budget.

The USGS Mineral Resources program is an essential source of unbiased research on the nation's mineral resources. This guidance is important to reduce the environmental impacts of mining and to maintain the growing value of processed materials from mineral resources that account for approximately \$500 billion in the U.S. economy. The proposed cuts would terminate multidisciplinary research that has important implications for public health (such as studies on mercury, arsenic and other inorganic toxins), environmental protection, infrastructure, economic development, and national security.

In addition to restoring proposed program cuts, we encourage Congress to consider additional increases that would enable the USGS to meet the tremendous need for science in support of public policy decision-making. More investment is needed to strengthen USGS partnerships, improve monitoring networks, implement important bioinformatics programs, produce high-quality digital geospatial data, and deliver the best possible science to address societally important problems. The USGS has a national mission that directly affects all citizens through natural hazards monitoring, water resource studies, biological and geological resource assessments, and other activities.

The USGS Coalition is grateful to Congress for its leadership in restoring past budget cuts and strengthening the U.S. Geological Survey. Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of our request. For additional information or to learn more about the USGS Coalition, please visit www.USGScoalition.org or contact co-chairs Robert Gropp of the American Institute of Biological Sciences (rgropp@aibs.org) or Craig Schiffries of the Geological Society of America (cschiffries@geosociety.org).