



National Science Foundation • Office of Inspector General
2415 Eisenhower Ave, Alexandria, VA 22314

MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 18, 2022

TO: Karen Marrongelle
Chief Operating Officer
Office of the Director

FROM: Mark Bell [REDACTED]
Assistant Inspector General
Office of Audits

SUBJECT: OIG Report No. 22-6-004, NSF Vetting of United States Antarctic Program Contractors

In April 2021, our contractors Kearney & Company, P.C. (Kearney) initiated a performance audit of NSF's Information Security Program for fiscal year 2021 as required by the *Federal Information Security Modernization Act of 2014* (FISMA, Pub. L. No. 113-283). As part of this ongoing audit, we reviewed NSF's vetting of its Antarctic Support Contract (ASC) contractors. We found that NSF did not ensure all ASC contractors were onboarded and vetted in accordance with NSF requirements; instead, NSF relied on the contractor's internal vetting processes, which are less rigorous than the minimum level of investigation NSF requires.

This routine activity memorandum contains two recommendations. NSF concurred with our recommendations. Please provide a written corrective action plan to address the recommendation within 60 calendar days. This corrective action plan should detail specific actions and associated milestone dates.

We provided an initial draft of this memorandum to NSF on November 30, 2021. NSF provided comments on December 17, 2021 which we considered and incorporated into an updated version of the draft memorandum issued on March 7, 2022. NSF its agency response on March 16, 2022 which we incorporated into the memorandum.

Antarctic Support Contract

NSF manages U.S. scientific research in Antarctica through the United States Antarctic Program (USAP). Leidos Innovations Corporation (Leidos) currently holds the Antarctic Support Contract (ASC) for USAP logistical and operational support.¹ Before the COVID-19 pandemic, USAP deployed about 3,000 people to Antarctica annually. ASC contractors receive access to U.S. facilities

¹ Leidos officially assumed the NSF Antarctic Support Contract from Lockheed-Martin on August 16, 2016. The contract transfer followed the merger between Leidos and Lockheed Martin's Information Systems & Global Solutions business segment. NSF originally awarded Lockheed Martin the contract in December 2011. The ASC is NSF's largest contract.

and property in Antarctica, including various U.S. research stations, vessels, and field camps, and access to the USAP network. The Office of Polar Programs (OPP) monitors the contract, valued at \$2.3 billion over 13 years, and collaborates with several other NSF offices and divisions to manage the USAP.

NSF Vetting Procedures

All new NSF employees, contractors, and temporary appointees must complete NSF's security vetting process, which aligns with government-wide standards.² NSF conducts background investigations to establish that applicants are suitable or fit for the job.³ To determine the level of investigation needed, NSF completes an Office of Personnel Management position designation record to identify the position's sensitivity and risk levels. The Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency conducts the investigation, which includes searches at law enforcement entities, courts, employers, educational institutions, creditors, and other record repositories, as well as a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) fingerprint check.

NSF's Personnel Security and Suitability (PSS) team within the Division of Administrative Services conducts an adjudication based on pertinent data in the background investigation and makes a favorable or unfavorable determination. All new NSF employees, contractors, and temporary appointees must receive a favorable interim fitness determination (or be granted reciprocity if they have an existing background investigation) before receiving a final offer and enter-on-duty date. NSF requires all contractors to receive an interim favorable fitness adjudication by the NSF PSS team before receiving initial access to NSF buildings, access to information and IT systems, or an NSF personal identity verification card.⁴ This process is designed to ensure that NSF staff, including contractors, are fit to perform work for or on behalf of the government.

NSF Has Not Vetted and Onboarded All ASC Contractors in Accordance with NSF Requirements

Kearney previously reported⁵ that NSF did not always complete required contractor vetting before onboarding and authorizing "privileged" USAP network access for users responsible for the maintenance, operation, monitoring or management of IT systems and USAP information. In response to Kearney's finding, OPP acknowledged it was not submitting all ASC contractors to NSF for vetting and adjudication as required, and instead was relying on the less rigorous, contractor-led processes for most contractors. As of October 2020, NSF received information for only [REDACTED] of 859 current ASC contractors for vetting and adjudication. The remaining [REDACTED] ASC contractors, including

² NSF's *New Employee Vetting and Onboarding Process Standard Operating Procedures, February 13, 2018, Version #5*, "To align with changing Government-wide standards, all new NSF employees, contractors and temporary appointees/assignments are required to complete the security vetting process and must be granted a favorable interim suitability/fitness determination *prior to* a final offer and enter on duty (EOD) or be granted reciprocity if they have an existing background investigation that meets the requirements."

³ The term "suitability" is used when referring to federal employees. Per Executive Order 13467, "contractor employee fitness" means fitness based on character and conduct for work for or on behalf of the government as a contractor employee.

⁴ According to the *NSF Contractor Onboarding and Separation Guide*, "an NSF interim fitness adjudication is based on a review of limited but required information which is provided initially by the contractor and submitted by the COR."

⁵ NSF OIG Report No. 20-2-002, *Performance Audit of the National Science Foundation's Information Security Program for FY 2019*, November 2019

█ with privileged access, were vetted through Leidos' internal process and were not submitted to NSF for vetting and adjudication as required. Leidos' vetting process includes █

█ Without these components, there is greater risk that a potential contractor may be unfit to work on behalf of NSF.

OPP attributed its reliance on contractor-led screening to a contracting officer authorizing, via an April 2012 e-mail, the ASC's former prime contractor to conduct its own screening of contractors and subcontractors who needed access to USAP facilities and unclassified IT resources. Although the contracting officer did not formally document this decision or modify the contract, this practice continued when Leidos took over the contract in 2016.

In an October 2020 memorandum, OPP documented several issues related to personnel investigation requirements on the Antarctic Support Contract. That same memorandum contained a risk assessment that concluded Antarctic operations could continue while corrective actions were implemented. At the time of our review,⁶ OPP, Division of Acquisition and Cooperative Support, Division of Administrative Services, and Division of Information Systems were working together to define a risk-based approach to vetting users of the USAP network. Furthermore, in January 2022, these offices signed an updated memorandum that defines actions NSF will take in a phased approach to complete NSF adjudication for the contractors.

NSF's contractor vetting and onboarding procedures are designed to ensure the safety and security of personnel, NSF information, IT systems, facilities, and equipment.⁷ Actions by an inadequately vetted contractor could result in the intentional or unintentional breach of information, damage to property, or injury to personnel that could detrimentally affect NSF operations. The lack of dedicated on-site law enforcement at USAP stations⁸ further illustrates the need to ensure that deployed personnel are suitable for working in this remote environment. Proper vetting of the ASC workforce will help protect USAP operational integrity and will help ensure the safety and security of USAP facilities and IT for those who conduct and support scientific research in Antarctica.

Recommendation

We recommend that NSF's Chief Operating Officer:

1. Review and update NSF contractor vetting procedures as appropriate to develop a risk-based approach consistent with applicable laws and regulations.
2. Ensure current and future ASC contractors are submitted to PSS for vetting as required per those procedures.

⁶ We conducted this routine activity between August and November 2021.

⁷ *NSF Contractor Onboarding and Separation Guide*, Version 4.0, April 2020. Version 1.0 was issued in October 2011.

⁸ NSF station managers in the Antarctic are appointed as Special Deputy U.S. Marshals and are authorized to search, detain, and arrest for specific offenses alleged to have been committed by a U.S. person at any Antarctic location.

Agency Response

Karen A. Marrongelle, Ph.D., Chief Operating Officer, responded as follows: “NSF appreciates the OIG’s interest in the U.S. Antarctic Program (“USAP”) and agrees with the OIG’s recommendations. We recognize that implementation of the OIG’s recommendations aligns with our longstanding priority of advancing safe and secure execution of USAP’s mission-critical responsibilities.”

We thank your staff for the assistance that was extended to the auditors. If you have any questions, please contact Laura Rainey, Director, Financial and IT Audits, at 703.292.7100.

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