

USGS Coalition

Testimony of the USGS Coalition
Craig Schiffries and Robert Gropp, Co-Chairs

Regarding the U.S. Geological Survey
FY 2008 Budget Request

To the United States Senate
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
April 26, 2007

Summary

The USGS Coalition appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony in support of increased appropriations for the United States Geological Survey (USGS) in fiscal year (FY) 2008. We continue to believe that the USGS budget request is below what is 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 \$1.2 billion in FY 2008.

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 2008 budget request for the USGS is \$975 million, a decrease of approximately \$8 million or 1 percent below the FY 2007 operating plan. The USGS budget has declined in real dollars for five consecutive years and it would decline for a sixth year if the FY 2008 budget request is 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 first 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.

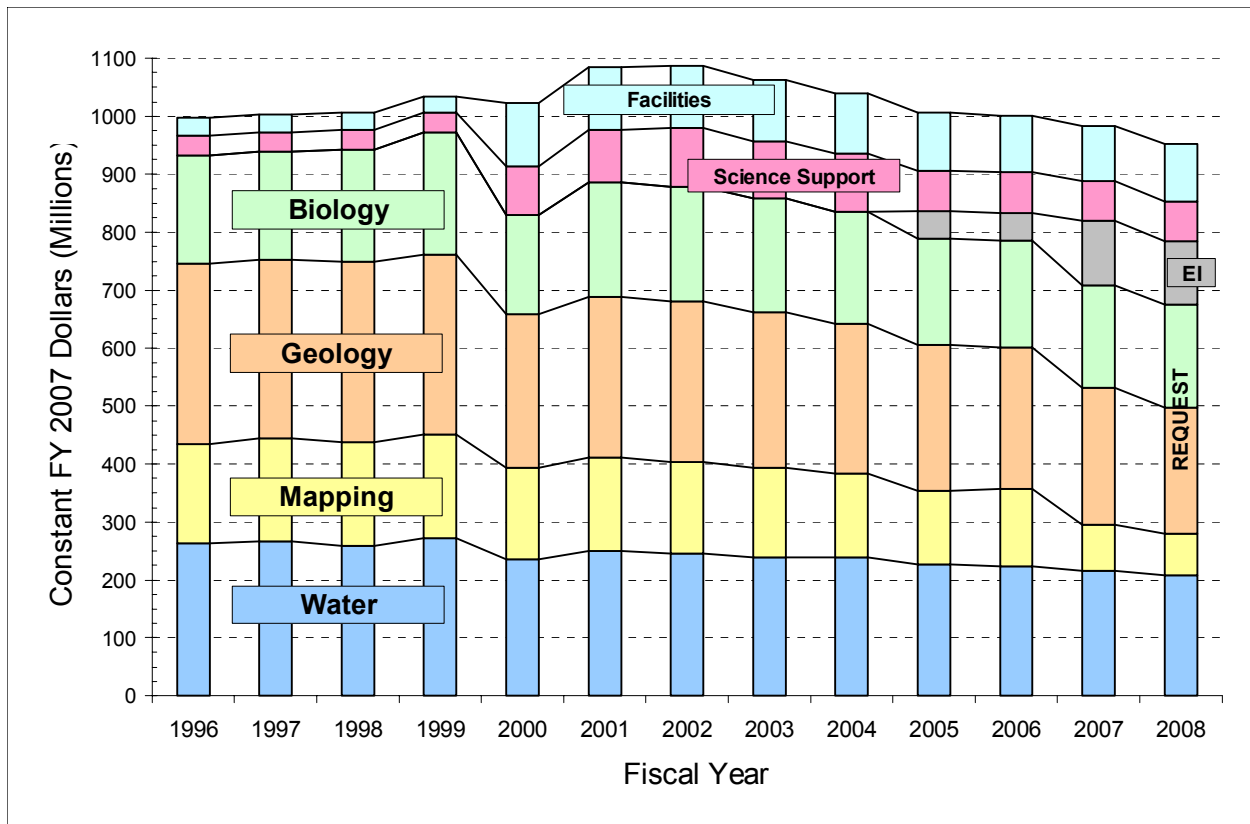


Figure 1. USGS funding in constant dollars, FY 1996 – FY 2008. EI is the Enterprise Information account. Source: USGS Budget Office.

Over the past several years, natural hazards negatively affected communities across the country, including flash floods in California and hurricanes in Florida. Forest fires, which burned a total of 8,653,883 acres of land in the United States between January 1 and September 12, 2006, exceeded the totals for the same period of any other year since 2000. 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

Mitigating the impacts of natural disaster 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. It operates a stream gage system that enables the National Weather Service to issue flood warnings. 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 cost hundreds of lives and billions of dollars in damages every year.

Equally as important, the USGS plays a critical role in bioinformatics and managing natural resources, essential to our economy, security, and environment. The USGS provides fundamental scientific data for wildlife and ecosystem management (*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 wildlife diseases (*e.g.*, Chronic Wasting Disease) that can cause billions of dollars in agricultural losses.

Evolving technology requires recurring USGS assessments of previously unexploited mineral and emerging energy resources, including unconventional fossil fuels, geothermal resources, and renewable energy sources such as biofuels.

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 decisionmakers.

The USGS Coalition is grateful to Congress for its leadership in restoring past budget cuts and strengthening the U.S. Geological Survey. The House Appropriations Committee has expressed the importance of funding USGS science programs in the base budget. Likewise, the Senate Appropriations Committee said: “The strength of the Survey’s existing efforts in many program areas is deserving of additional support. The Committee urges that future budget requests place a stronger emphasis on the Survey’s core programs, which have proven value and strong public support” (S.Rpt. 108-341).

USGS Budget Request

The USGS Coalition urges Congress to increase the budget of the U.S. Geological Survey to \$1.2 billion in FY 2008, which is necessary for the agency to continue providing critical information to the public and to decisionmakers 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, including the Mineral Resources program, the Water Resources Research Institutes, the Priority Ecosystem Science program and the Contaminant Biology program, accelerate the timetable for deployment of critical projects (*e.g.*, the National Streamflow Information Program and the multi-hazards initiative), and launch new science initiatives (*e.g.*, pilot phase of the National Water Quality Monitoring Network).

The President’s FY 2008 budget request would cut funding for the USGS by approximately \$8 million or 1 percent to \$975 million compared with the FY 2007 operating plan. The budget request would add approximately \$24 million for fixed costs as well as \$5 million to support the Healthy Lands Initiative and \$3 million for the Ocean Action Plan. The USGS budget request would provide funding for several initiatives, including the continued development of Landsat 8, increased energy research, and cooperative research units. These initiatives deserve the support of Congress.

The USGS budget request would cut more than \$20 million from the Mineral Resources program, a decrease of more than 40 percent that would decimate the program and necessitate buyouts of hundreds of federal workers. The budget request would also eliminate all funding for

the Water Resources Research Institutes (\$6.4 million in FY 2006), which are located in all 50 states. It would also cut \$650,000 from the Contaminant Biology program to study endocrine disruptors, particularly right here in the nation's capital. 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 accounted for \$478 billion in the U.S. economy in 2005, an increase of 8 percent over the previous year. 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 decisionmaking. 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.

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 National Council for Science and the Environment (schiffries@NCSEonline.org).