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# EXCLUSIVE: Porn surfing rampant at U.S. science foundation

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**EXCLUSIVE:**

Employee misconduct investigations, often involving workers accessing pornography from government computers, grew sixfold last year inside the taxpayer-funded foundation that doles out billions of dollars of scientific research grants, according to budget documents and other records obtained by The Washington Times.

The problems at the National Science Foundation (NSF) were so pervasive they swamped the agency's inspector general and forced the internal watchdog to cut back on its primary mission of investigating grant fraud and recovering misspent tax dollars.

"To manage this dramatic increase without an increase in staff required us to significantly reduce our efforts to investigate grant fraud," the inspector general recently told Congress in a budget request. "We anticipate a significant decline in investigative recoveries and prosecutions in coming years as a direct result."

The budget request doesn't state the nature or number of the misconduct cases, but records obtained by The Times through the Freedom of Information Act laid bare the extent of the well-publicized porn problem inside the government-backed foundation.

For instance, one senior executive spent at least 331 days looking at pornography on his government computer and chatting online with nude or partially clad women without being detected, the records show.

When finally caught, the NSF official retired. He even offered, among other explanations, a humanitarian defense, suggesting that he frequented the porn sites to provide a living to the

overseas women. Investigators put the cost to taxpayers of the senior official's porn surfing at between \$13,800 and about \$58,000.

"He explained that these young women are from poor countries and need to make money to help their parents and this site helps them do that," investigators wrote in a memo.

The independent foundation, funded by taxpayers to the tune of \$6 billion in 2008, is tasked with handing out scientific grants to colleges, universities and research institutions nationwide. The projects it funds range from mapping the genome of the potato to exploring outer space with powerful new telescopes. It has a total of 1,200 career employees.

Recent budget documents for the inspector general cite a "6-fold increase in employee misconduct cases and associated proactive management implication report activities." The document doesn't say how many cases were involved in the increase, and officials could not immediately provide a figure.

Documents obtained by The Times through an open records request show the foundation's inspector general closed 10 employee misconduct investigations last year, up from just three in 2006. There were seven cases in 2007. Of the 10 cases closed last year, seven involved online pornography, records show. However, those figures don't include pending cases.

Leslie Paige, a spokeswoman for the nonpartisan watchdog Citizens Against Government Waste, called the situation "inexcusable."

"What kind of oversight is there when they have to shift people from looking at grant fraud to watch for people looking at pornography?" she said.

Foundation spokeswoman Dana Topousis said officials have enacted more rigorous computer training and tightened controls to filter out inappropriate Internet addresses from the sites employees can access from their work computers.

Deputy Inspector General Tim Cross said despite the office's budget request, the foundation appears to have fixed the systematic problems that allowed workers to look at pornography on the job.

He said the office's 2010 budget request was written well in advance and that, at the time, "we were consumed with a lot of these cases."

"The agency has done a lot to address the underlying issues in terms of getting out the mess that it's not to be done and making technological changes," he said.

The foundation's inspector general uncovers scientific misconduct that can force the return of

misused grant money to the government but told Congress it was diverted from that mission the porn cases.

The office was unable to immediately provide an estimate of how much money the projected decline in investigative recoveries will cost taxpayers. According to congressional reports, overall investigative recoveries by the watchdog agency totaled more than \$2 million for the year ending March 31.

The pornography problem came to light earlier this year, when the inspector general's office published short summaries of several recent cases in a semiannual report to Congress.

The report caught the attention of Sen. Charles E. Grassley of Iowa, ranking Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, who launched an inquiry that generated unwanted media attention on the online activities of employees at the foundation.

The newly obtained documents provide fresh evidence that the problem wasn't just an embarrassment: It was expensive and often went undetected for long periods of time.

The names of all of the employees targeted in the pornography cases were redacted from the more than 120 pages of investigative documents released to The Times. Names were withheld because none of the employees was subject to criminal prosecution, recent civil court action or debarment.

The documents don't include cases that the foundation examined internally without the inspector general's involvement.

"The employees who were investigated were disciplined in one way or another," Ms. Topous said, adding that she could not comment on individual disciplinary actions.

One foundation employee paid an unspecified sum last year after investigators found that during a three-week period in June 2008, the worker perused hundreds of pornographic Web sites during work hours. That employee received a 10-day suspension.

In an official notice of the decision, the foundation called the conduct "unprofessional and unacceptable," but also noted the employee's work history and lack of any previous disciplinary actions.

As for the unnamed "senior executive" who spent at least 331 days looking at pornography at work, investigators said his proclivity for pornography was common knowledge among several co-workers.

"At the same time, employees were generally reluctant to make any official report or compla

because the misconduct involved a senior staff member and employees feared that they would suffer in some form of complaining," the investigators later wrote in a summary of the case.

Another employee in a different case was caught with hundreds of pictures, videos and even PowerPoint slide shows containing pornography. Asked by an investigator whether he had completed any government work on a day when a significant amount of pornography was downloaded, the employee responded, "Um, I can't remember," according to records.

The employee also said that friends sent him the pornographic files, that he never planned on viewing them and that he never got around to deleting the files, a claim one official later called "simply not believable."

Suspended for 10 days, the employee unsuccessfully appealed the decision after arguing that was too harsh. Other employees were terminated.

Another employee who stored nude images of herself on her computer told investigators she mistakenly had downloaded the pictures. She received counseling and was told to adhere to the foundation's policies on computer use.

The foundation is hardly the only government agency to be embarrassed by disclosures about employees looking at pornography at work.

The inspector general for the Securities and Exchange Commission noted in a report last fall it had recently conducted three investigations into employees who misused government computers to view pornography.

At the time of the report, one employee had been fired and another suspended, while disciplinary action against a third was pending.