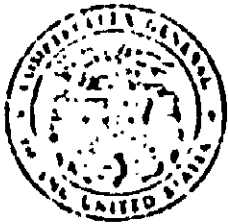


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COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20518

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[Concerning Report on Fossil Energy]

The Honorable John D. Dingell ^{Do not}
Chairman, Subcommittee on
Energy and Power
Committee on Interstate and
Foreign Commerce
House of Representatives

available to public reading room

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Thank you for your January 2, 1979, letter concerning our September 18, 1978, report to you on "Fossil Energy Research, Development, and Demonstration: Opportunities for Change" (EHD-78-57). You enclosed a copy of your January 2, 1979, letter to the Secretary of the Department of Energy requesting his response to several questions concerning our report. You also asked the Secretary to provide us a copy of his reply for our review and comment and requested our opinion concerning the Department's compliance with industry participation provisions of laws applicable to the Department. We will prepare a response to you on your latter question and provide our comments on the Secretary of Energy's response to your questions as soon as possible after we receive our copy of his reply to you.

You also expressed concern in your letter over (1) GAO providing a draft of the report to the Department for comment and the length of time between receipt of comments and report issuance and (2) the signing of the Department's comments by an official who lacks any program responsibility. Regarding your latter concern, the Department's liaison office has, in many ways, helped us carry out our work more effectively. Oftentimes, our reports cover programs and activities of several organizational units in the Department. The liaison office usually is able to quickly assimilate the comments of the various organizational units and prepare a response within our requested time frame. Moreover, we know of no occasion where the GAO liaison office inaccurately presented the views of the Department officials.

Regarding your concern over our policy of obtaining agency comments and their effect on timely report issuance,

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you stressed that in the case of reports requested by the Subcommittee, we should, as needed, review them with agency officials to insure their factual accuracy. You stated, however, that this review should not include providing a draft report to the agency and waiting for a written response and indicated a preference for requesting the agency's comments yourself as you did in this case.

We share your concern about the need for GAO to reduce the time required to complete the preparation and review of reports, including the time allowed agencies to submit comments. Others in the Congress have also expressed similar concerns. On June 22 of last year, the House Select Committee on Congressional Operations issued a report (Number 95-1317) that included recommendations for improving our services to the Congress. On January 12, 1979, I replied to the Committee on actions taken to improve the timeliness and relevance of our efforts. Of special interest to you would be the changes taken in our policy in obtaining agency comments. Our policy now

- provides operating divisions more flexibility in deciding whether formal written comments are needed. We now encourage a greater use of oral, rather than written, comments on draft reports. This should shorten the time in getting comments and issuing a number of reports.

- directs that a tougher stance be taken regarding the time allowed agencies to respond to draft reports. In those cases where we believe written comments are necessary, agencies will usually be given no more than 30 days to respond (this is down from our previous 60-day time frame).

- calls for a more vigorous followup when there are indications that an agency is not going to adhere to our specified time frame for receipt of its comments. If comments are not received on time, our operating divisions will process the reports without them.

As you can see, we are changing our policies and practices in obtaining agency comments. We still strongly believe, however, a policy of obtaining agency comments is the correct one for the General Accounting Office. With respect to your Subcommittee, we will, as in the past, continue to work

closely with you and your staff in agreeing upon the necessary arrangements to maximize our responsiveness and at the same time be useful to your needs.

Sincerely yours,

151 Elmer Q. Staats

Comptroller General
of the United States