National Defense Authorization Act Makes the Mission Harder For Military But Not Impossible

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Congress recently passed the 2012 authorization bill for the Department of Defense (DoD) and included a provision that bans LEED certification at the Platinum and Gold level for DoD buildings. To be clear, this provision is irrational and misguided at best, and deliberately problematic for the leaders in the defense agencies at worst. But before reacting as if the sky is falling, it's worth taking a deeper look at the "provision" and noticing that it isn't really all that iron clad.

Nothing in the bill indicates that the Department can't keep certifying buildings, since the provision only forbids certifying to the highest levels of LEED. Why certain members of Congress think that our military service men and women do not deserve the best buildings possible is unanswerable.

As background, DoD was one of the earliest users of LEED and has the largest number of LEED-registered and certified buildings owned or occupied by any federal agency. We doubt that the Department would walk away from a more-than-decade-long commitment to sustainability. DoD knows that LEED and building efficiency is delivering real savings to the department. In 2009, in its own Department of Defense Strategic Sustainability Performance Plan, DoD noted that energy use per square foot declined by 10 percent and total water consumption decreased by 4.6 percent, in spite of increased military operations.

DoD can still LEED certify to Gold and Platinum levels if there is no additional cost or they document a positive return on investment, which they have done and will continue to do. For example, earlier this year, Navy Secretary Ray Mabus announced that new Navy and Marine Corps buildings would attain a LEED Gold certification level beginning FY 2013 and would do so at no additional cost.

"It shouldn't cost anymore, particularly in this economic environment, to build buildings that are sustainable than it is to build building that are not. It's going to require some creative contracting and some creative building and construction practices, but I am absolutely confident that we will be able to do it," Sec. Mabus said on Tuesday, May, 10, 2011.

We think the Navy and Marine Corps will be able to keep their commitments despite obstructionists in Congress. Hopefully, this will be a learning moment for some of our elected officials on how build sustainably and how to reach these higher levels of performance.

The one somewhat good thing in the bill is the request of a cost effectiveness study on LEED certification and other building efficiency tools, although it has been done before. A study released just this August by the General Services Administration (GSA) found their green buildings have 27 percent lower energy use compared to the national average, while reducing operational costs by 19 percent compared to the national average. LEED Gold buildings were singled out as being particularly high performers. We have no doubt that this new study will come to the same conclusion, and we are happy that this time the LEED Volume program can be specifically explored for DoD. We'd love to work even more closely with leadership agencies to certify more buildings and drive down costs.

Bottom line – our military will be able to continue its leadership on sustainable building and energy security, despite the indefensible actions of some of our elected "leaders." Something tells me that they'll be able to rise to the occasion.

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