

CQ TODAY ONLINE NEWS – HOMELAND SECURITY

July 10, 2012 – 6:38 p.m.

Lawmakers Praise Idea of Giving TSA Director a Longer Term in Office

By Rob Margetta, CQ Staff

A proposal to give the head of the Transportation Security Administration a fixed, multi-year term won bipartisan support at an otherwise divisive House subcommittee hearing on overhauling the agency.

Mike D. Rogers, R-Ala., chairman of the House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Transportation Security, said he likes the idea enough to support it legislatively.

“I’m embarrassed to say I hadn’t thought of that before,” he said.

The suggestion came from a pair of witnesses who pointed out that, since its creation, the TSA has had five leaders, including those serving in an acting capacity. Over the same period, the FBI, where the director gets a 10-year term, has had only one. Current FBI head Robert S. Mueller III received a two-year extension in 2011.

Switching TSA over from having a director who serves at the pleasure of the president to a five-year term would help address some of the leadership and image problems that the agency has suffered over the past decade, said Tom Blank, executive vice president at the consulting group Gephardt Government Affairs.

“It will help ensure leadership consistency and nonpartisanship in the long term,” he said.

Rick “Ozzie” Nelson, a director of the Center for Strategic and International Studies’ homeland security and counterterrorism program, said the TSA’s operations are often highly politicized but the agency’s work ideally should rise above those sorts of debates. Greater leadership continuity would help in that area, he said.

“Extending the terms of the TSA administrator would help them depoliticize the position while increasing their ability to institute long-term plans and evolve the organization,” he said.

Subcommittee ranking Democrat Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas said the proposal had merit, but she wanted to see it go beyond the five years suggested by the witnesses.

“I think 10 years,” she said. “I think five years would be completely undoable.”

Last year, Rep. Frank R. Wolf, R-Va., filed a bill (HR 2622) that would establish a 10-year term for the TSA head, but the Homeland Security Committee took no action on it. Rogers said at the hearing that he wants to see a new legislative push.

“I’m gonna see if we can’t move something like that along,” he said. “That’s got that great potential.”

The chairman said he's an admirer of TSA's current leader, John S. Pistole, but he was highly critical of the agency's current policies, saying it has reached a "bloated size" and demands a personnel cut of up to 40 percent. Rogers is a supporter of moving screening operations at airports to the private sector, with TSA in a supervisory role, a proposal that other witnesses made at the hearing.

"We've got to be smarter and leaner about the way we do things," Rogers said.

The chairman added that a public perception that screeners are idle on the job contributes to the backlash against the agency.

"People hate the TSA, and we've got to do something about that," he said.

Nelson testified that lawmakers may be able to help with that image problem — by avoiding piling more criticism on the TSA.

"It will be impossible for TSA to improve its image if government officials continue to use the agency as a source of political rhetoric," he said.

A version of this article appeared in the *July 11, 2012 print issue of CQ Today*