



Insight

Congressional Review Act Discrepancies Persist

SAM BATKINS | MARCH 24, 2016

In testimony last year, Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) Administrator Howard Shelanski acknowledged that federal agencies should follow their obligations under the Congressional Review Act (CRA). As he testified, “I absolutely agree that agencies should uphold their obligations to report these rules.” After a scathing report in the [Washington Post](#) detailing how agencies routinely did not submit rules to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), as required under the CRA, Administrator Shelanski vowed to help correct the problem. After reviewing the last two years of data (2014 and 2015), it’s clear that agencies still frequently skirt legal reporting requirements. The American Action Forum found 955 rules weren’t sent to GAO in 2014 and roughly 1,069 weren’t reported in 2015.

Background

Under the [CRA](#), “before a rule can take effect,” every federal agency must submit a report to both Congress and GAO with a copy of the rule, a statement about whether the rule is “[major](#),” and the effective date of the measure. Technically, a rule that fails to follow this procedure cannot take effect. In practice, however, there is little preventing agencies from hiding regulations from Congress and GAO. Parties challenging rules that violate procedure will run into Section 805 of the CRA: “No determination, finding, action, or omission under this chapter shall be subject to judicial review.”

Findings

AAF compared the number of final rules in the Federal Register to the number of submissions to GAO during the last two years. For example, in 2014 the Federal Register recorded [3,541 rules](#), compared to only [2,445](#) rules logged at GAO. However, AAF took the

second step of removing routine document corrections that likely don't qualify as rules under the CRA. This removed 141 regulations, bringing the discrepancy total to 955. There might be other mitigating factors that will lower the gap, but there were still likely hundreds of rules that failed to follow CRA procedure.

For 2015, the Federal Register has recorded 3,408 rules, but 147 of these were corrected documents. As of this writing, agencies only submitted 2,192 rules to GAO, leaving a discrepancy of 1,069 rules that weren't reported last year, this, despite pleas from Administrator Shelanski that agencies know their responsibilities under the law.

Beyond the aggregate totals, there are some notable rulemakings where the White House and GAO don't agree. During the Obama Administration, the Department of Transportation (DOT) has finalized 30 major rules according to the White House. See below:

The screenshot shows the Reginfo.gov website header with the following text: "OFFICE of INFORMATION and REGULATORY AFFAIRS", "OFFICE of MANAGEMENT and BUDGET", "EXECUTIVE OFFICE of the PRESIDENT", and "Reginfo.gov". It also includes the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) logo and search filters for Agenda, Reg Review, and ICR. The main content area is titled "Executive Order Review Search Results" and displays search criteria: "EO Review Search Criteria: Agency=Department of Transportation. Review Status=Concluded; Published from 01/20/2009; Published to 03/02/2016; Major=Yes; Stage of Rulemaking=Interim Final Rule,Final Rule,Final Rule No Material Change;". Below the criteria, it shows "Number Of Records Found: 30" with links for "View All" and "New Search". A table header is visible with columns: "Received Date", "RIN", "Agency", "Rule Title", "Status", "Concluded Date", and "Conclusion Action".

However, GAO has only recorded 24 major rules from DOT. See below:

Search for Reports on Federal Agency Major Rules

About 24 results for Legal: Other Legal Function: Federal Rule: Major: Department of Transportation: Published from 01/20/2009 to 03/02/2016 : Effective to 12/31/2017 : Received to 03/02/2016 : **1931**

Show Results For

< Federal Rule
Major
Final Rule (23)
Interim Rule (1)

Refine By

Date
Past 6 Months (1)
Custom Date Range

Agency
< Any Agency
Department of Transportation

Priority
Significant/Substantive (24)

Sort By: Results per page:

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION, FEDERAL MOTOR CARRIER SAFETY
ADMINISTRATION: ELECTRONIC LOGGING DEVICES AND HOURS OF SERVICE
SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS
<http://www.gao.gov/fedrules/182799>
Dec 16, 2015

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION, NATIONAL HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY
ADMINISTRATION: FEDERAL MOTOR VEHICLE SAFETY STANDARDS; ELECTRONIC
STABILITY CONTROL SYSTEMS FOR HEAVY VEHICLES
<http://www.gao.gov/fedrules/182360>
Jun 23, 2015

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION: PIPELINE AND HAZARDOUS MATERIALS
SAFETY ADMINISTRATION: HAZARDOUS MATERIALS: ENHANCED TANK CAR
STANDARDS AND OPERATIONAL CONTROLS FOR HIGH-HAZARD FLAMMABLE TRAINS
<http://www.gao.gov/fedrules/180681>
May 8, 2015

Some of this discrepancy results from joint rules, but there are other instances that defy an easy answer. In two instances, the White House concluded that rules were major, but the GAO reports disagreed. The administration deemed [tire efficiency disclosures](#) and [pilot certification requirements](#) as major, but when reported to GAO, both were labeled [non-major](#). This raises troubling issues for Congress, as they typically rely on these GAO reports to initiate formal procedures to rescind regulations under the CRA.

In the final DOT discrepancy, the administration declared a tractor safety rule as [non-major](#). Yet, GAO labeled the rulemaking [major](#), with costs up to [\\$178 million](#), which should easily qualify the measure for major rule status. Why did the White House state the rule was not major when it clearly exceeded the statutory threshold?

Unfortunately, DOT was not the only agency with a troubling record of complying with the CRA. The Department of Energy (DOE) also had several rules where the status was in dispute. Since 2009, GAO has recorded 29 major rules from DOE. See below:

Search for Reports on Federal Agency Major Rules

[Start over](#)

About 29 results for Legal: Other Legal Function: Federal Rule: Major: Department of Energy: Published from 01/20/2009 to 03/02/2016 : Effective to 12/31/2017 : Received to 03/02/2016 : ****

Sort By: Date new->old	Results per page: 10
<p>DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY: ENERGY CONSERVATION PROGRAM: ENERGY CONSERVATION STANDARDS FOR RESIDENTIAL BOILERS http://www.gao.gov/fedrules/182701 Jan 15, 2016</p>	<p>DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY: ENERGY CONSERVATION PROGRAM FOR CERTAIN INDUSTRIAL EQUIPMENT: ENERGY CONSERVATION STANDARDS FOR SMALL, LARGE, AND VERY LARGE AIR-COOLED COMMERCIAL PACKAGE AIR CONDITIONING AND HEATING EQUIPMENT AND COMMERCIAL WARM AIR FURNACES http://www.gao.gov/fedrules/182704 Jan 15, 2016</p>
<p>DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY: ENERGY CONSERVATION PROGRAM: ENERGY CONSERVATION STANDARDS FOR REFRIGERATED BOTTLED OR CANNED BEVERAGE VENDING MACHINES http://www.gao.gov/fedrules/182700 Jan 8, 2016</p>	

In theory, this means the White House should also have a record of 29 major DOE rules. However, they list only 25. See below:

Executive Order Review Search Results

EO Review Search Criteria: Agency=Department of Energy, Review Status=Concluded; Published from 01/20/2009; Published to 03/02/2016; Major=Yes; Stage of Rulemaking=Interim Final Rule, Final Rule, Final Rule No Material Change;

Number Of Records Found: 25 [View All](#) [New Search](#)

Received Date	RIN	Agency	Rule Title	Status	Concluded Date	Conclusion Action

In two instances, one for [vending machine efficiency](#) and for “[Energy Priorities and Allocation](#),” OIRA confirmed that both rules were not major. Yet, GAO listed [both rules](#) as major. There does not appear to be an immediate explanation for why the administration would deny a rule as major, but GAO would include a major rule report.

Finally, in a strange instance, OIRA had [no record](#) of approving a rule for HVAC test procedures that GAO listed [as major](#). The only record on OIRA’s website is a Unified Agenda entry that initially [did not confirm](#) major rule status, only to [reverse the decision](#) later. There has been at least one other similar instance.

A Food and Drug Administration (FDA) major rule also seems to have slipped through OIRA's cracks. Although the rule appears in both GAO's [records](#) and as a [final rule](#) in the Federal Register, the only OIRA review record is for its [proposed stage](#). See below:

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Received Date	RIN	Agency	Rule Title	Status	Concluded Date	Conclusion Action
06/18/2013	0910-AG88	0910- HHS/ FDA	Revision of Postmarketing Reporting Requirements Discontinuance or Interruption in Supply of Certain Products (Drug Shortages)	Published	10/01/2013	Consistent with Change

At the bottom of the page, there are links for "About Us", "Related Resources", "Disclosure", "Accessibility", "Privacy Policy", and "Contact Us".

Conclusion

Despite assurances from Administrator Shelanski, agencies still do not follow basic legal reporting requirements. Congress has a constitutional responsibility to conduct oversight of the executive, and without compliance from the administration, this oversight grows more difficult. Beyond the hundreds of minor rules that weren't reported correctly, it is troubling the White House and GAO can't even agree on major regulations.