**NAPA EOM Panel Summary Notes**

**GAO’s Center for Strategic Foresight**

October 18, 2019

**Background.** The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) has established a new Center for Strategic Foresight. It offers new attention and impetus to formalizing and institutionalizing the use of strategic foresight in government. GAO’s executive sponsor and the Center’s inaugural director provided an overview of the Center’s organization, objectives, and potential future activities.

This panel has followed the development and use of strategic foresight in executive branch agencies and [offered its recommendations](https://www.napawash.org/working-groups/standing-panels/executive-organization-and-management/strategic-foresight-in-government) on this issue to the 2016 presidential transition team.

**Discussants:**

**James-Christian Blockwood,** Managing Director, Strategic Planning and External Liaison, GAO (and NAPA Fellow)

**Stephen Sanford,** Director, Center for Strategic Foresight, GAO

**Presentation Highlights:**

Strategic foresight isn’t a new concept in government. For example, there was a 1974 House rule regarding the importance of foresight in the legislative process. But it tends to evolve in fits and starts. Today, there are about two dozen formal strategic foresight units in agencies across the government. Some have been in place for more than 20 years; however, most are relatively new. The US lags internationally in having a centralized strategic foresight capacity in government. Countries like Canada, S. Korea, and Singapore, for example, have had long-standing foresight capabilities embedded in the core of government.

*Why is strategic foresight important?* It tracks trends in the economy, environment, demographics, and the impact of science & technology, and how these trends affect society and government. It offers a heads-up to policymakers on emerging issues in advance so they can take action while there is still time to act. Foresight has the potential to give Congress actionable information which it can use to frame policies with an understanding of possible effects in the future.

*Why does it make sense for GAO to have established a Center on Strategic Foresight?* It is credible, is nonpartisan, and with its leader, the Comptroller General, appointed for a 15-year term, there is a good deal of continuity in leadership support.

The Center was given an operational charter in November 2017 to examine technology and societal trends that would affect government programs. Historically, there has been leadership support within GAO for the development and use of foresight across its different policy domains, whereby foresight was injected into its operations via its strategic plan, advisory panels, and environmental scanning.

The new Center enhances GAO’s existing foresight activities by creating a platform for synthesizing and communicating emerging issues, especially where they intersect with other trends and issues. As a platform, the Center is a way to engage with foresight experts around the world. It recently designated nine fellows (2-year terms) to advise on such issues.

*Activities to date:* Focus on uncertainties and emerging issues in government, such as:

* Privacy, identity management
* Future of USPS, Energy programs
* Deep space, deep fakes (the Sept. conference has led to Hill follow-up, dialog)

*Planned areas of focus for future activity:*

* The implications of cellular agriculture
* The effects of long-term demographic shifts (urban-rural) and their impact on factors such as water infrastructure, health, workforce, and climate change.
* The implications of technical developments in video/voice analysis and emotion recognition (state of mind) software.
* Implications of technical progress towards a brain-machine interface.