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Audit blasts dive team operations

PORT: City report calls \$300,000 in overtime since '07 'largely unjustified.'

By **Kristopher Hanson**
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LONG BEACH — City Auditor Laura Doud issued a stinging report Tuesday showing the Long Beach Harbor Department's port dive team lacks "proper controls" and has accumulated roughly \$300,000 in "largely unjustified overtime" since 2007.

The report, which is available in full at www.cityauditorlauradoud.com, indicates the port's specially trained dive team has issued incomplete and/or inaccurate financial statements and spent too much on overtime, training and "downtime."

The nine-member dive team is one of the nation's few crews trained to clear underwater wreckage and clear waterways in the event of a terrorist attack or accident. They're also trained to search in the harbor's murky waters for bombs, bodies, hazardous materials and other dangers.

Auditor Doud's report showed the team's members average 19 hours each of overtime per week, at a rate of 150 percent normal pay.

The Auditor's Office found one diver clocked 168.5 hours in a two-week period, more than double the scheduled 80 hours.

Overall, overtime costs in fiscal year 2010 totaled \$104,589, up from \$35,531 in fiscal year 2007, though the team had four fewer members at the time.

Still, total salary costs since 2007 have soared by more than \$400,000, despite a general stagnation in overall shipping volumes.

Her office suggested dive team members scale back overtime hours and cut any unneeded training programs, in part by using some of their time to assist in regular patrol duties.

The port operates a security division separate from the Long Beach Police Department.

"We recommend harbor management ensure the dive team is managed appropriately by ensuring personnel are accountable for their time, including justification and approval for their overtime and training," Doud said. "Every step should be taken to ensure dive team resources

are used efficiently, including assisting patrol on a routine basis to help offset patrol staffing needs and overtime."

Doud has conducted several audits since taking office in 2006, including of the police department, parks, recreation and marine and financial management.

"The ultimate goal here is to help the city become as financially efficient and responsible as possible," Doud said. "This report doesn't reflect on the work or dedication of the port dive team. They do an excellent job. But we have to find ways to be as smart and responsible with taxpayer dollars as possible. That's all."

Port authorities responded to the audit by saying they would improve timekeeping procedures, employee oversight and dive team policies.

"Management agrees that strong systems of internal controls are necessary in all aspects of (dive team) management," said Richard Steinke, Port of Long Beach executive director. "The timekeeping process is currently being revised to improve both the internal controls and proper documentary support of these controls."

The port said Doud's office would be sent an update in six months of their progress in cutting overtime and ensuring the efficiencies in the audit are implemented.

Doud's report stated that "overall, we found the dive team operation lacked structure, planning and effective oversight, creating inefficiencies resulting in unjustified overtime and under-utilization of manpower."

The dive team's supervisors could not be reached for comment.

Their operations include underwater welding, repair of damaged piers and wharves, removal of debris, anti-terrorism operations and assisting the Coast Guard and other port authorities.

Doud's office has conducted a number of similar reports in recent years, exposing waste and fraud in city departments and helping push elected leaders to implement reforms.

She was also instrumental in a voter-approved initiative establishing a small per-barrel tax on each of the estimated 40,000 barrels of oil drilled on city property each day.

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