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U.S. Secret-Keeping-- How Much It Costs Us

Washington

The staff of the House Subcommittee on Foreign Operations and Government Information has discovered that the cost to the taxpayers of government secret-keeping runs between \$60 million and \$80 million a year.

The estimate is based on the preliminary findings of an examination the government accounting office is conducting for the subcommittee on the cost of running the security classification system. This includes everything from safes and file cabinets to top-secret cover sheets for documents.

HEARING

One government official familiar with the classification system believes, however, that this \$60 million to \$80 million estimate is too low.

The GAO examination is

part of the preparations the subcommittee is making for extensive hearings this year, beginning March 6, on the workings of the security classification system and on how the executive branch withholds information from Congress and the public.

The hearings will extend and develop the exploratory hearings that the subcommittee, headed by Representative William Moorhead (Dem-Pa.), held last summer following publication of the Pentagon Papers.

This year's hearings will seek ways to force disclosure by strengthening the Freedom of Information Act and looking into the possibility of creating an independent agency to declassify documents.

REVIEW

The broad framework of the hearings will be a review of what effect four years of

the Freedom of Information Act has had on the flow of information to Congress and the public. The act went into effect in 1967.

The general opinion in Washington has been that the act has resulted in relatively little increase in disclosure, particularly in the most controversial area of foreign and military policy. A clause in the act now exempts the executive branch from disclosing this type of information.

QUIZ

The staff of the subcommittee as sent out a questionnaire to nearly 100 government departments, agencies, bureaus and commissions asking for detailed records of what requests for information were made under the act and what responses, including denials, those varying agencies gave.

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