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State division has gotten better at job, report says

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The Hawaii Occupational Safety and Health Division has turned around its performance by increasing the number of inspections and consultation visits, but still has room for improvement, according to an annual federal review.

The report released yesterday by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration said the Hawaii agency has improved since Republican Gov. Linda Lingle appointed Nelson Befitel as state labor director in January 2003. The report covered the period from Oct. 1, 2002, through Sept. 30, 2003.

"Historically, Hawaii's ... goals in terms of number of consultation visits have been relatively low compared to those of other consultation programs, and OSHA has raised this concern over the last several evaluations," the report said. "In spite of the modest number of consultations projected, the program often failed to meet its projections until this fiscal year."

OSHA said the state division performed effectively in private-sector enforcement and consultation, and in meeting funding obligations. HIOSH fell just one inspection shy of its projected number of 1,000 private-sector inspections, the report said. The state division also

improved the time it takes to process discrimination complaints and conducted 253 consultation visits in fiscal 2003 to beat its goal of 245. Despite the improved performance, OSHA still had areas of concern, saying the state division needs to focus on identification of hazards, standards and rulemaking; public-sector consultation; internal quality assurance; and staffing.

OSHA said the state needs to pay attention to employers that are more likely to have high hazards, and must examine the low rate of hazard identification in the construction industry to see if compliance officers need further training.

The state said yesterday it has started initiatives to keep an eye on accidents in the booming construction sector, such as stepping up inspections at job sites where people can get hurt from falling. The state conducted 153 inspections that led to 40 citations for violations of fall-protection standards between January 2003 and June 2004.

The federal report also said HIOSH needs to improve the adoption of federal program changes and fill all vacancies with qualified people as soon as possible.