

## Lawmakers question proposed oversight on state contracts

RYAN STRUYK, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Idaho lawmakers say they are skeptical that a proposed plan to tighten oversight on high-value state contracts goes far enough to increase accountability and prevent future lawsuits.

The House State Affairs Committee quizzed Sarah Hilderbrand from the Department of Administration on Tuesday, focusing on whether her division's proposal offers adequate oversight.

The new guidelines were developed last year after multiple scandals plagued Idaho's most expensive contracts. However, they now need legislative approval.

Republican Rep. Brent Crane from Nampa says he's troubled that officials can't promise that the new guidelines would have prevented the collapse of the \$60 million broadband contract, where a district judge ruled the Department of Administration violated its own procurement laws. "You couldn't give a definitive answer that this would be a solution to the problem," he told Hilderbrand.

Hilderbrand, who works as the department's purchasing manager, said it would be "impossible to say" whether the failure of the broadband contract could have been stopped under the new guidelines.

The plan calls for forming a board that would oversee contracts valued at \$5 million or more, as well as a review by a third party. It also calls for more training for employees at the division of purchasing.

Chairman Rep. Tom Loertscher, R-Iona, wondered whether \$5 million was too high, and whether more contracts should be included in the accountability process.

Hilderbrand said the high volume of contracts makes it difficult to keep up. "We have to rely on the agency. They are the experts," she said.

While Idaho has nearly 440 state-funded service contracts, the standards would only apply to 45, but they total \$2.6 billion. The remaining contracts are valued at roughly \$164 million.

Crane said he isn't convinced the proposed ideas will be enough to prevent similar future problems.

"I don't think the problem is just solved with more training. That's not an argument I'm buying," he said. "I think there are systemic flaws inside the way we let contracts within the state of Idaho."

The panel is expected to vote on the rules soon.