

Watchdog: Military blew \$43M on useless gas station



Tom Vanden Brook, USA TODAY

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(Photo: MAURICIO LIMA, AFP/Getty Images)

WASHINGTON — U.S. taxpayers footed the bill for a \$43 million natural-gas filling station in Afghanistan, a boondoggle that should have cost \$500,000 and has virtually no value to average Afghans, the government watchdog for reconstruction in Afghanistan announced Monday.

A Pentagon task force awarded a \$3 million contract to build the station in Sheberghan, Afghanistan, but ended up spending \$12 million in construction costs and \$30 million in "overhead" between 2011 and 2014, the [Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction \(SIGAR\)](#) found. Meanwhile, a similar gas station built in neighboring Pakistan cost \$500,000.

"It's hard to imagine a more outrageous waste of money than building an alternative fuel station in a war-torn country that costs 8,000% more than it should, and is too dangerous for a watchdog to verify whether it is even operational," [Sen. Claire McCaskill](#), D-Mo., said in a statement. "Perhaps equally outrageous however, is that the Pentagon has apparently shirked its responsibility to fully account for the taxpayer money that's been wasted — an unacceptable lack of transparency that I'll be thoroughly investigating."

The compressed-natural gas station was designed to show the viability of tapping the country's natural gas reserves. But the inspector general determined that Pentagon's Task Force for [Stability and Business Operations](#) failed to conduct a feasibility study before launching the project.

If they had, the inspector general noted in his report, the Pentagon would have found most Afghans have little use for it. The Pentagon's own contractor stated that converting a car to compressed natural gas costs \$700 in Afghanistan. The average annual income there is \$690.

In a letter to the inspector general, the Pentagon noted that it had shuttered the task force earlier this year and would try to find officials to answer questions. The task force had been given \$800 million to help foster private investment in Afghanistan.

"As recently as October 13, 2015, SIGAR contacted (the [Department of Defense](#)) to speak to these unnamed employees, but DoD again failed to identify anyone," according to the inspector general's report.

McCaskill, in a letter to the Pentagon, demanded to know how the money was spent and whether the filling station is still open for business. She noted that the contractor responsible for keeping the pumps running failed to renew its operating license only six months after it opened.

[Sen. Kelly Ayotte](#), R-N.H., who, like McCaskill, sits on the [Armed Services Committee](#), also demanded answers from the Pentagon.

"At a time of growing threats and constrained defense budgets, this kind of mismanagement is simply unacceptable, and I look forward to hearing from the Pentagon on what specific steps it will take to prevent such an egregious waste of tax dollars in the future," Ayotte said in a statement. "Our troops and the taxpayers deserve better."

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