

Women's small biz program to make long-awaited debut

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After 10 years of delays, rewrites and lawsuits, the women's procurement program is finally ready to launch.

Karen Mills, head of the Small Business Administration, told the House Small Business Committee on Wednesday that the women's small business contracting program will start before the end of 2010. "This is one of the things we are very proud of," Mills said.

In March, SBA [released a proposed rule](#) identifying 83 industries in which women-owned small businesses were underrepresented. The proposal was a substantial departure from a [2008 George W. Bush administration plan](#) that identified only four such industries.

The latest proposed rule authorizes set-aside contracts less than a certain dollar amount for women-owned small businesses in the industries in which they are underrepresented. Officials identified the eligible industries based on a combination of the share of contracting dollars awarded to women-owned firms in those industries and the share of contracts awarded.

More than 1,000 individuals, businesses and trade associations submitted comments on the new proposal. The public comment period ended in early May.

"We have dealt with every one of [these comments]," Mills told the committee. "Some were extremely helpful and valuable to rewrite the rule."

In 2000, President Clinton signed the Equity in Contracting for Women Act, allowing the government to set aside contracts for women-owned small businesses in industries where females were historically underrepresented.

The program sputtered, however, during the Bush administration. A 2004 lawsuit by the U.S. Women's Chamber of Commerce forced Bush officials to finally draft a proposal. But the 2008 plan set off a firestorm of complaints from lawmakers and women's advocates, who accused SBA of choosing the narrowest methodology for determining underrepresentation.

The Obama administration decided last year to [scrap existing proposals](#) and draft a new, comprehensive rule "based on the analysis of the prior studies and on all the questions and comments previously received."