



Highlights of [GAO-05-374](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, Committee on Resources, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2004, the Forest Service reported to the Congress that it had a backlog of nearly 900,000 acres of land needing reforestation—the planting and natural regeneration of trees. Reforestation and subsequent timber stand improvement treatments, such as thinning trees and removing competing vegetation, are critical to restoring and improving the health of our national forests after timber harvests or natural disturbances such as wildland fires.

GAO was asked to (1) examine the reported trends in federal lands needing reforestation and timber stand improvement, (2) identify the factors that have contributed to these trends, and (3) describe any potential effects of these trends that federal land managers have identified.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Agriculture direct the Chief of the Forest Service to take several actions to improve the agency's ability to identify and prioritize its reforestation and timber stand improvement needs.

In commenting on a draft of this report, the Forest Service on behalf of the Department of Agriculture agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-374.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

FOREST SERVICE

Better Data Are Needed to Identify and Prioritize Reforestation and Timber Stand Improvement Needs

What GAO Found

The acreage of Forest Service lands needing reforestation and timber stand improvement generally has been increasing since 2000, according to Forest Service officials and data reported to the Congress, as well as other studies. While the Forest Service data are sufficiently reliable to identify this relative trend they are not sufficiently reliable to accurately quantify the agency's specific needs, establish priorities among treatments, or estimate a budget. The data's reliability is limited in part because some Forest Service regions and forests define their needs differently, and some do not systematically update the data to reflect current forest conditions or review the accuracy of the data. Forest Service officials acknowledge these problems, and the agency is implementing a new data system to better track its needs. While helpful, this action alone will not be sufficient to address the data problems GAO has identified.

According to Forest Service officials, reforestation needs have been increasing in spite of declining timber harvests because of the growing acreage of lands affected by natural disturbances such as wildland fires, insect infestation, and diseases. In the past, reforestation needs resulted primarily from timber harvests, whose sales produced sufficient revenue to fund most reforestation needs. Now needs are resulting mainly from natural causes, and funding sources for such needs have remained relatively constant rather than rising in step with increasing needs. For timber stand improvement, the acreage needing attention is growing in part because high-density planting practices, used in the past to replace harvested trees, are creating needs for thinning treatments today and because treatments have not kept pace with the growing needs.

Forest Service officials believe the agency's ability to achieve its forest management objectives may be impaired if future reforestation and timber stand improvement needs continue to outpace the agency's ability to meet these needs. For example, maintaining wildlife habitat—one forest management objective—could be hindered if brush grows to dominate an area formerly forested with tree species that provided forage, nesting, or other benefits to wildlife. Also, if treatments are delayed, costs could increase because competing vegetation—which must be removed to allow newly reforested stands to survive—grows larger over time and becomes more costly to remove. Further, without needed thinning treatments, agency officials said forests become dense, fueling wildland fires and creating competition among trees, leaving them stressed and vulnerable to insect attack. While agency officials expressed concern about these potential effects, the agency has not adjusted its policies and priorities for the reforestation and timber stand improvement program so that adverse effects can be minimized. Forest Service officials did, however, acknowledge the need to make such changes.