United States Government Accountability Office

GAO

Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

For Release on Delivery
Expected at 10:00 a.m. EDT
Thursday, July 14, 2005

WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

Timely Identification of Long-Term Options and Funding Needs Is Critical

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Natural Resources and Environment

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GAO-05-923T

Highlights

Highlights of GAO-05-923T, a testimony before the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

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Timely Identification of Long-Term Options and Funding Needs Is Critical

Why GAO Did This Study

Wildland fires are increasingly threatening communities and ecosystems. In recent years, these fires have become more intense due to excess vegetation that has accumulated, partly as a result of past management practices. Experts have said that the window of opportunity for effectively responding to wildland fire is rapidly closing.

The federal government's cost to manage wildland fires continues to increase. Appropriations for its wildland fire management activities tripled from about $1 billion in fiscal year 1999 to nearly $3 billion in fiscal year 2005.

This testimony discusses the federal government's progress over the past 5 years and future challenges in managing wildland fires. It is based primarily on GAO's report: *Wildland Fire Management: Important Progress Has Been Made, but Challenges Remain to Completing a Cohesive Strategy* (GAO-05-147, Jan. 14, 2005).

What GAO Recommends

In its report, GAO recommended that the Secretaries of Agriculture and of the Interior develop a plan for completing a cohesive strategy that identifies options and funding needed to address wildland fire problems. The agencies agreed with GAO's recommendation and expect to develop such a plan by August 2005.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-923T.

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

What GAO Found

Over the last 5 years, the Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture and land management agencies in the Department of the Interior, working with the Congress, have made important progress in responding to wildland fires. Most notably, the agencies have adopted various national strategy documents addressing the need to reduce wildland fire risks, established a priority to protect communities in the wildland-urban interface, and increased efforts and amounts of funding committed to addressing wildland fire problems, including preparedness, suppression, and fuel reduction on federal lands. In addition, the agencies have begun improving their data and research on wildland fire problems, made progress in developing long-needed fire management plans that identify actions for effectively addressing wildland fire threats at the local level, and improved federal interagency coordination and collaboration with nonfederal partners. The agencies also have strengthened overall accountability for their investments in wildland fire activities by establishing improved performance measures and a framework for monitoring results.

Despite producing numerous planning and strategy documents, the agencies have yet to develop a cohesive strategy that explicitly identifies the long-term options and related funding needed to reduce the excess vegetation that fuels fires in national forests and rangelands. Reducing these fuels lowers risks to communities and ecosystems and helps contain suppression costs. As GAO noted in 1999, such a strategy would help the agencies and the Congress to determine the most effective and affordable long-term approach for addressing wildland fire problems. Completing this strategy will require finishing several efforts now under way, each with its own challenges. The agencies will need to finish planned improvements in a key data and modeling system—LANDFIRE—to more precisely identify the extent and location of wildland fire threats and to better target fuel reduction efforts. In implementing LANDFIRE, the agencies will need more consistent approaches to assessing wildland fire risks, more integrated information systems, and better understanding of the role of climate in wildland fire. In addition, local fire management plans will need to be updated with data from LANDFIRE and from emerging agency research on more cost-effective approaches to reducing fuels. Completing a new system designed to identify the most cost-effective means for allocating fire management budget resources—Fire Program Analysis—may help to better identify long-term options and related funding needs. Without completing these tasks, the agencies will have difficulty determining the extent and location of wildland fire threats, targeting and coordinating their efforts and resources, and resolving wildland fire problems in the most timely and cost-effective manner over the long term.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss the status of the federal government's efforts to address our nation's wildland fire problems. Wildland fire is a natural process that plays an important role in the health of many fire-adapted ecosystems, but it also can cause catastrophic damage to communities and ecosystems. The trend of increasing wildland fire threats to communities and ecosystems that we reported on 5 years ago has continued.[1] The average acreage of lands burned by wildland fires annually from 2000 through 2004 was about 62 percent greater than the average amount burned annually during the 1990s. Experts have noted that catastrophic damage from wildland fires probably will continue to increase until an adequate long-term federal response is implemented. They stated that efforts to resolve the growing threats of catastrophic wildland fires are in a race against time and the window of opportunity is rapidly closing.

My testimony today summarizes the findings of our January 2005 report, which discusses the progress the federal government has made over the last 5 years and key challenges it faces in developing and implementing a long-term response to wildland fire problems.[2] This report is based primarily on over 25 reviews we conducted in recent years of federal wildland fire management that focused largely on the activities of the Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture and the land management agencies in the Department of the Interior, which together manage about 95 percent of all federal lands.

Summary

In the past 5 years, the federal government has made important progress in putting into place the basic components of a framework for managing and responding to the nation's wildland fire problems, including

- establishing a priority to protect communities near wildlands—called the wildland-urban interface;

[1]GAO, *Western National Forests: A Cohesive Strategy Is Needed to Address Catastrophic Wildfire Threats*, GAO/RCED-99-65 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 2, 1999)

[2]GAO, *Wildland Fire Management: Important Progress Has Been Made, but Challenges Remain to Completing a Cohesive Strategy*, GAO-05-147 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 14, 2005).

- increasing the amount of effort and funds available for addressing fire-related concerns, such as fuel reduction on federal lands;

- improving data and research on wildland fire, local fire management plans, interagency coordination, and collaboration with nonfederal partners; and

- refining performance measures and results monitoring for wildland fire management.

While this progress has been important, many challenges remain for addressing wildland fire problems in a timely and effective manner. Most notably, the land management agencies need to complete a cohesive strategy that identifies the long-term options and related funding needed for reducing fuels and responding to wildland fires when they occur. A recent Western Governors' Association report also called for completing such a cohesive federal strategy. The agencies and the Congress need such a strategy to make decisions about an effective and affordable long-term approach for addressing problems that have been decades in the making and will take decades more to resolve. However, completing and implementing such a strategy will require that the agencies complete several challenging tasks, including

- developing data systems needed to identify the extent, severity, and location of wildland fire threats to the nation's communities and ecosystems;

- updating local fire management plans to better specify the actions needed to effectively address these threats; and

- assessing the cost-effectiveness and affordability of options for reducing fuels.

In our January 2005 report, we recommended that the Secretaries of Agriculture and of the Interior provide the Congress, in time for its consideration of the agencies' fiscal year 2006 wildland fire management budgets, with a joint tactical plan outlining the critical steps the agencies will take, together with related time frames, to complete a cohesive strategy that identifies long-term options and needed funding for reducing and maintaining fuels at acceptable levels and responding to the nation's wildland fire problems. The departments of Agriculture and the Interior have said that they will produce such a plan by August 2005. In these times of limited resources, we believe it is critical that the agencies develop and implement this plan in a timely fashion so that they and the Congress, especially this Subcommittee, have the best information available to make informed decisions in addressing the nation's wildland fire problems.

Background

Wildland fire triggered by lightning is a normal, inevitable, and necessary ecological process that nature uses to periodically remove excess undergrowth, small trees, and vegetation to renew ecosystem productivity. However, various human land use and management practices, including several decades of fire suppression activities, have reduced the normal frequency of wildland fires in many forest and rangeland ecosystems and have resulted in abnormally dense and continuous accumulations of vegetation that can fuel uncharacteristically large and intense wildland fires. Such large intense fires increasingly threaten catastrophic ecosystem damage and also increasingly threaten human lives, health, property, and infrastructure in the wildland-urban interface. Federal researchers estimate that vegetative conditions that can fuel such fires exist on approximately 190 million acres—or more than 40 percent—of federal lands in the contiguous United States but could vary from 90 million to 200 million acres, and that these conditions also exist on many nonfederal lands.

Our reviews over the last 5 years identified several weaknesses in the federal government's management response to wildland fire issues. These weaknesses included the lack of a national strategy that addressed the likely high costs of needed fuel reduction efforts and the need to prioritize these efforts. Our reviews also found shortcomings in federal implementation at the local level, where over half of all federal land management units' fire management plans did not meet agency requirements designed to restore fire's natural role in ecosystems consistent with human health and safety. These plans are intended to provide program direction for fuel reduction, preparedness, suppression, and rehabilitation actions. The agencies also lacked basic data, such as the amount and location of lands needing fuel reduction, and research on the effectiveness of different fuel reduction methods on which to base their fire management plans and specific project decisions. Furthermore, coordination among federal agencies and collaboration between these agencies and nonfederal entities were ineffective. This kind of cooperation is needed because wildland fire is a shared problem that transcends land ownership and administrative boundaries. Finally, we found that better accountability for federal expenditures and performance in wildland fire management was needed. Agencies were unable to assess the extent to which they were reducing wildland fire risks or to establish meaningful fuel reduction performance measures, as well as to determine the cost-effectiveness of these efforts, because they lacked both monitoring data and sufficient data on the location of lands at high risk of catastrophic fires to know the effects of their actions. As a result, their performance measures created incentives to reduce fuels on all acres, as opposed to focusing on high-risk acres.

Because of these weaknesses, and because experts said that wildland fire problems could take decades to resolve, we said that a cohesive, long-term, federal wildland fire management strategy was needed.[3] We said that this cohesive strategy needed to focus on identifying options for reducing fuels over the long term in order to decrease future wildland fire risks and related costs. We also said that the strategy should identify the costs associated with those different fuel reduction options over time, so that the Congress could make cost-effective, strategic funding decisions.

Important Progress Has Been Made in Addressing Federal Wildland Fire Management Problems over the Last 5 Years

The federal government has made important progress over the last 5 years in improving its management of wildland fire. Nationally, it has established strategic priorities and increased resources for implementing these priorities. Locally, it has enhanced data and research, planning, coordination, and collaboration with other parties. With regard to accountability, it has improved performance measures and established a monitoring framework.

Progress in National Strategy: Priorities Have Been Clarified and Funding Has Been Increased for Identified Needs

Over the last 5 years, the federal government has been formulating a national strategy known as the National Fire Plan, composed of several strategic documents that set forth a priority to reduce wildland fire risks to communities. Similarly, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 directs that at least 50 percent of funding for fuel reduction projects authorized under the act be allocated to wildland-urban interface areas. While we have raised concerns about the way the agencies have defined these areas and the specificity of their prioritization guidance, we believe that the act's clarification of the community protection priority provides a good starting point for identifying and prioritizing funding needs. Similarly, in contrast to fiscal year 1999, when we reported that the Forest Service

[3] GAO/RCED-99-65.

had not requested increased funding to meet the growing fuel reduction needs it had identified, fuel reduction funding for both the Forest Service and Interior more than quadrupled by fiscal year 2005. The Congress, in the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, also authorized $760 million per year to be appropriated for hazardous fuels reduction activities, including projects for reducing fuels on up to 20 million acres of land. Moreover, appropriations for both agencies' overall wildland fire management activities, including preparedness, fuel reduction, and suppression, tripled from about $1 billion in fiscal year 1999 to nearly $3 billion in fiscal year 2005.

Progress in Local Implementation: Data and Research, Fire Management Planning, and Coordination and Collaboration Have Been Strengthened

The agencies have strengthened local wildland fire management implementation by making significant improvements in federal data and research on wildland fire over the past 5 years, including an initial mapping of fuel hazards nationwide. Additionally, in 2003, the agencies approved funding for development of a geospatial data and modeling system, called LANDFIRE, to map wildland fire hazards with greater precision and uniformity. LANDFIRE—estimated to cost $40 million and scheduled for nationwide implementation in 2009—will enable comparisons of conditions between different field locations nationwide, thus permitting better identification of the nature and magnitude of wildland fire risks confronting different community and ecosystem resources, such as residential and commercial structures, species habitat, air and water quality, and soils.

The agencies also have improved local fire management planning by adopting and executing an expedited schedule to complete plans for all land units that had not been in compliance with agency requirements. The agencies also adopted a common interagency template for preparing plans to ensure greater consistency in their contents.

Coordination among federal agencies and their collaboration with nonfederal partners, critical to effective implementation at the local level, also has been improved. In 2001, as a result of congressional direction, the agencies jointly formulated a 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy with the Western Governors' Association to involve the states as full partners in their efforts. An implementation plan adopted by the agencies in 2002 details goals, time lines, and responsibilities of the different parties for a wide range of activities, including collaboration at the local level to identify fuel reduction priorities in different areas. Also in 2002, the agencies established an interagency body, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, composed of senior Agriculture and Interior officials and nonfederal representatives, to improve coordination of their activities with each other and nonfederal parties.

Progress in Accountability: Better Performance Measures and a Results Monitoring Framework Have Been Developed

Accountability for the results the federal government achieves from its investments in wildland fire management activities also has been strengthened. The agencies have adopted a performance measure that identifies the amount of acres moved from high-hazard to low-hazard fuel conditions, replacing a performance measure for fuel reductions that measured only the total acres of fuel reductions and created an incentive to treat less costly acres rather than the acres that presented the greatest hazards. Additionally, in 2004, to have a better baseline for measuring progress, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council approved a nationwide framework for monitoring the effects of wildland fire. While an implementation plan is still needed for this framework, it nonetheless represents a critical step toward enhancing wildland fire management accountability.

Agencies Face Several Challenges to Completing a Long-Needed Cohesive Strategy for Reducing Fuels and Responding to Wildland Fire Problems

While the federal government has made important progress over the past 5 years in addressing wildland fire, a number of challenges still must be met to complete development of a cohesive strategy that explicitly identifies available long-term options and funding needed to reduce fuels on the nation's forests and rangelands. Without such a strategy, the Congress will not have an informed understanding of when, how, and at what cost wildland fire problems can be brought under control. None of the strategic documents adopted by the agencies to date have identified these options and related funding needs, and the agencies have yet to delineate a plan or schedule for doing so. To identify these options and funding needs, the agencies will have to address several challenging tasks related to their data systems, fire management plans, and the assessment of the cost-effectiveness and affordability of different options for reducing fuels.

Completing and Implementing the LANDFIRE System Is Essential to Identifying and Addressing Wildland Fire Threats

The agencies face several challenges to completing and implementing LANDFIRE, so that they can more precisely identify the extent and location of wildland fire threats and better target fuel reduction efforts. These challenges include using LANDFIRE to better reconcile the effects of fuel reduction activities with the agencies' other stewardship responsibilities for protecting ecosystem resources, such as air, water, soils, and species habitat, which fuel reduction efforts can adversely affect. The agencies also need LANDFIRE to help them better measure and assess their performance. For example, the data produced by LANDFIRE will help them devise a separate performance measure for maintaining conditions on low-hazard lands to ensure that their conditions do not deteriorate to more hazardous conditions while funding is being focused on lands with high-hazard conditions.

In implementing LANDFIRE, however, the agencies will have to overcome the challenges presented by the current lack of a consistent approach to assessing the risks of wildland fires to ecosystem resources as well as the lack of an integrated, strategic, and unified approach to managing and using information systems and data, including those such as LANDFIRE, in wildland fire decision making. Currently, software, data standards, equipment, and training vary among the agencies and field units in ways that hamper needed sharing and consistent application of the data. Also, LANDFIRE data and models may need to be revised to take into account recent research findings that suggest part of the increase in wildland fire in recent years has been caused by a shift in climate patterns. This research also suggests that these new climate patterns may continue for decades, resulting in further increases in the amount of wildland fire. Thus, the nature, extent, and geographical distribution of hazards initially identified in LANDFIRE, as well as the costs for addressing them, may have to be reassessed.

Fire Management Plans Will Need to Be Updated with Latest Data and Research on Wildland Fire

The agencies will need to update their local fire management plans when more detailed, nationally consistent LANDFIRE data become available. The plans also will have to be updated to incorporate recent agency fire research on approaches to more effectively address wildland fire threats. For example, a 2002 interagency analysis found that protecting wildland-urban interface communities more effectively—as well as more cost-effectively—might require locating a higher proportion of fuel reduction projects outside of the wildland-urban interface than currently envisioned, so that fires originating in the wildlands do not become too large to suppress by the time they arrive at the interface. Moreover, other agency research suggests that placing fuel reduction treatments in specific geometric patterns may, for the same cost, provide protection for up to three times as many community and ecosystem resources as do other approaches, such as placing fuel breaks around communities and ecosystems resources. Timely updating of fire management plans with the latest research findings on optimal design and location of treatments also will be critical to the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of these plans. The Forest Service indicated that this updating could occur during annual reviews of fire management plans to determine whether any changes to them may be needed.

Ongoing Efforts to Assess the Cost-Effectiveness and Affordability of Fuel Reduction Options Need to Be Completed

Completing the LANDFIRE data and modeling system and updating fire management plans should enable the agencies to formulate a range of options for reducing fuels. However, to identify optimal and affordable choices among these options, the agencies will have to complete certain cost-effectiveness analysis efforts they currently have under way. These efforts include an initial 2002 interagency analysis of options and costs for reducing fuels, congressionally-directed improvements to their budget allocation systems, and a new strategic analysis framework that considers affordability.

The Interagency Analysis of Options and Costs: In 2002, a team of Forest Service and Interior experts produced an estimate of the funds needed to implement eight different fuel reduction options for protecting communities and ecosystems across the nation over the next century. Their analysis also considered the impacts of fuels reduction activities on future costs for other principal wildland fire management activities, such as preparedness, suppression, and rehabilitation, if fuels were not reduced. The team concluded that the option that would result in reducing the risks to communities and ecosystems across the nation could require an approximate tripling of current fuel reduction funding to about $1.4 billion for an initial period of a few years. These initially higher costs would decline after fuels had been reduced enough to use less expensive controlled burning methods in many areas and more fires could be suppressed at lower cost, with total wildland fire management costs, as well as risks, being reduced after 15 years. Alternatively, the team said that not making a substantial short-term investment using a landscape focus could increase both costs and risks to communities and ecosystems in the long term. More recently, however, Interior has said that the costs and time required to reverse current increasing risks may be less when other vegetation management activities—such as timber harvesting and habitat improvements—are considered that were not included in the interagency team's original assessment but also can influence wildland fire.

The cost of the 2002 interagency team's option that reduced risks to communities and ecosystems over the long term is consistent with a June 2002 National Association of State Foresters' projection of the funding needed to implement the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy developed by the agencies and the Western Governors' Association the previous year. The state foresters projected a need for steady increases in fuel reduction funding up to a level of about $1.1 billion by fiscal year 2011. This is somewhat less than that of the interagency team's estimate, but still about 2-1/2 times current levels.

The interagency team of experts who prepared the 2002 analysis of options and associated costs said their estimates of long-term costs could only be considered an approximation because the data used for their national-level analysis were not sufficiently detailed. They said a more accurate estimate of the long-term federal costs and consequences of different options nationwide would require applying this national analysis framework in smaller geographic areas using more detailed data, such as that produced by LANDFIRE, and then aggregating these smaller-scale results.

The New Budget Allocation System: Agency officials told us that a tool for applying this interagency analysis at a smaller geographic scale for aggregation nationally may be another management system under development—the Fire Program Analysis system. This system, being developed in response to congressional committee direction to improve budget allocation tools, is designed to identify the most cost-effective allocations of annual preparedness funding for implementing agency field units' local fire management plans. Eventually, the Fire Program Analysis system, being initially implemented in 2005, will use LANDFIRE data and provide a smaller geographical scale for analyses of fuel reduction options and thus, like LANDFIRE, will be critical for updating fire management plans. Officials said that this preparedness budget allocation system—when integrated with an additional component now being considered for allocating annual fuel reduction funding—could be instrumental in identifying the most cost-effective long-term levels, mixes, and scheduling of these two wildland fire management activities. Completely developing the Fire Program Analysis system, including the fuel reduction funding component, is expected to cost about $40 million and take until at least 2007 and perhaps until 2009.

The New Strategic Analysis Effort: In May 2004, Agriculture and Interior began the initial phase of a wildland fire strategic planning effort that also might contribute to identifying long-term options and needed funding for reducing fuels and responding to the nation's wildland fire problems. This effort—the Quadrennial Fire and Fuels Review—is intended to result in an overall federal interagency strategic planning document for wildland fire management and risk reduction and to provide a blueprint for developing affordable and integrated fire preparedness, fuels reduction, and fire suppression programs. Because of this effort's consideration of affordability, it may provide a useful framework for developing a cohesive strategy that includes identifying long-term options and related funding needs. The preliminary planning, analysis, and internal review phases of this effort have been completed and an initial report is expected in July 2005.

The improvements in data, modeling, and fire behavior research that the agencies have under way, together with the new cost-effectiveness focus of the Fire Program Analysis system to support local fire management plans, represent important tools that the agencies can begin to use now to provide the Congress with initial and successively more accurate assessments of long-term fuel reduction options and related funding needs. Moreover, a more transparent process of interagency analysis in framing these options and their costs will permit better identification and resolution of differing assumptions, approaches, and values. This transparency provides the best assurance of accuracy and consensus among differing estimates, such as those of the interagency team and the National Association of State Foresters.

A Recent Western Governors' Association Report Is Consistent with GAO's Findings and Recommendation

In November 2004, the Western Governors' Association issued a report prepared by its Forest Health Advisory Committee that assessed implementation of the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy, which the association had jointly devised with the agencies in 2001.[4] Although the association's report had a different scope than our review, its findings and recommendations are, nonetheless, generally consistent with ours about the progress made by the federal government and the challenges it faces over the next 5 years. In particular, it recommends, as we do, completion of a long-term, federal, cohesive strategy for reducing fuels. It also cites the need for continued efforts to improve, among other things, data on hazardous fuels, fire management plans, the Fire Program Analysis system, and cost-effectiveness in fuel reductions—all challenges we have emphasized today.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, the progress made by the federal government over the last 5 years has provided a sound foundation for addressing the problems that wildland fire will increasingly present to communities, ecosystems, and federal budgetary resources over the next few years and decades. As yet, however, there is no clear single answer about how best

[4]*Report to the Western Governors on the Implementation of the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy*, Western Governors' Association Forest Health Advisory Committee (Denver, Colo.: 2004).

to address these problems in either the short or long term. Instead, there are different options, each needing further development to understand the trade-offs among the risks and funding involved. The Congress needs to understand these options and trade-offs in order to make informed policy and appropriations decisions on this 21st century challenge.

This is the same message we provided in 1999 when we first called for development of a cohesive strategy identifying options and funding needs. But it has not been completed. While the agencies are now in a better position to do so, they must build on the progress made to date by completing data and modeling efforts underway, updating their fire management plans with the results of these data efforts and ongoing research, and following through on recent cost-effectiveness and affordability initiatives. However, time is running out. Further delay in completing a strategy that cohesively integrates these activities to identify options and related funding needs will only result in increased long-term risks to communities, ecosystems, and federal budgetary resources.

Because there is an increasingly urgent need for a cohesive federal strategy that identifies long-term options and related funding needs for reducing fuels, we recommended that the Secretaries of Agriculture and of the Interior provide the Congress, in time for its consideration of the agencies' fiscal year 2006 wildland fire management budgets, with a joint tactical plan outlining the critical steps the agencies will take, together with related time frames, to complete such a cohesive strategy.

In an April 2005 letter, Agriculture and Interior said that they will produce by August 2005, for the Wildland Fire Leadership Council's review and approval, a joint tactical plan that will identify the steps and time frames for completing a cohesive strategy. We look forward to the agencies completing this important step. However, as noted at the outset of this testimony, the window of opportunity for effectively addressing wildland fire is rapidly closing. Thus, developing a cohesive strategy should not wait until 2009, when LANDFIRE and the Fire Program Analysis are fully developed. As we have noted, the 2002 interagency analysis of long-term options and costs is a good starting point that can serve as a basis for providing the Congress with interim updates on options and funding needs to respond to wildland fires.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have at this time.

GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

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