



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

## 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](http://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](mailto:robinsonr@gao.gov), or Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or [nazzaror@gao.gov](mailto:nazzaror@gao.gov).

# WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

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

### 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.