



Highlights of [GAO-06-1016](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In recent years, Congress has expressed concerns about the federal land management agencies' ability to provide quality recreational opportunities and reduce visitor confusion over the variety of user fees. In December 2004, Congress passed the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (REA) to standardize recreation fee collection and use at federal lands and waters.

GAO was asked to determine (1) what the agencies have done to coordinate implementation of REA, (2) what agencies have done to implement REA, (3) the extent to which agencies have controls and accounting procedures for collected fees, (4) how projects and activities are selected to receive funding from fees, and (5) the extent of unobligated fund balances. To answer these objectives, GAO reviewed agency guidance, analyzed fee data, interviewed officials, visited 26 fee-collecting units, and administered a nationwide survey to 900 fee-collecting units.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making a number of recommendations to improve agencies' implementation of REA, including controls for recreation fee collection. In commenting on the draft report, Interior and Agriculture identified actions under way or planned to address them.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-1016.

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

RECREATION FEES

Agencies Can Better Implement the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act and Account for Fee Revenues

What GAO Found

The Departments of the Interior (DOI) and Agriculture (USDA) established four working groups to facilitate interagency cooperation and coordination of REA implementation. Each working group has made progress, but some issues remain unresolved. For example, the Interagency Pass working group has yet to determine the price to charge for the new pass, which is to be implemented in January 2007.

To implement REA, agencies reviewed their fee programs and made modifications to the fee programs at some of their units. For example, several of USDA's Forest Service units dropped 437 sites from their fee program, such as picnic areas, because they did not meet REA criteria. However, not all units are in compliance with REA. Many agency officials said that while the agencies have issued some interim guidance, REA was difficult to interpret and suggested the need for more specific and detailed guidance on the fee program. In addition, DOI's Bureau of Reclamation has not yet determined whether to implement REA. Reclamation is assessing how REA applies to its operations.

Some agencies lack adequate controls and accounting procedures for collected recreation fees and lack effective guidance for establishing such controls. On the basis of visits, some units did not have an effective means of verifying whether all collected fees are accounted for. In addition, many units have not implemented a system of routine audits to help ensure that fees are collected and used as authorized and that collected funds are safeguarded.

The various agencies participating under REA have different processes for selecting projects to be funded with recreation fee revenues. At DOI's Bureau of Land Management and Fish and Wildlife Service and USDA's Forest Service, most proposed projects are approved at the local unit level, usually within a few weeks. At DOI's National Park Service, fee projects are reviewed and approved at the unit, regional, and headquarters or department level before projects are funded. According to National Park Service officials, under this process, it can sometimes take a year or more to obtain approval for a requested fee project, which delays project implementation and contributes to unobligated fee revenue balances.

Agencies have \$300 million in unobligated fee revenue balances. Unit officials cited several reasons for the unobligated balances, such as the need to save for large projects. Many unit officials also said that recreation fee revenues are essential to providing services at their recreation areas that would not otherwise be funded.