

Highlights of [GAO-11-423T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Forest Service, within the Department of Agriculture, manages over 190 million acres of national forest and grasslands. The agency is responsible for managing its lands for various purposes—including recreation, grazing, timber harvesting, and others—while ensuring that such activities do not impair the lands' long-term productivity. Numerous GAO reports examining different aspects of Forest Service programs—including a testimony before this Subcommittee in 2009—have identified persistent management challenges facing the agency. In light of the federal deficit and long-term fiscal challenges facing the nation, the Forest Service cannot ensure that it is spending its limited budget effectively and efficiently without addressing these challenges.

This testimony highlights some of the management challenges facing the Forest Service today and is based on recent reports GAO has issued on a variety of the agency's activities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made a number of recommendations intended to improve the Forest Service's management of wildland fires, strengthen its collection of data, increase accountability, and improve program management. The Forest Service has taken steps to implement many of these recommendations, but additional action is needed if the agency is to make further progress in rectifying identified shortcomings.

View [GAO-11-423T](#) or key components. For more information, contact Anu K.Mittal at (202) 512-3841 or mittala@gao.gov.

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FOREST SERVICE

Continued Work Needed to Address Persistent Management Challenges

What GAO Found

In 2009, GAO highlighted management challenges that the Forest Service faced in three key areas—wildland fire management, data on program activities and costs, and financial and performance accountability. The Forest Service has made some improvements, but challenges persist in each of these three areas. In addition, recent GAO reports have identified additional challenges related to program oversight and strategic planning.

Strategies are still needed to ensure effective use of wildland fire management funds. In numerous previous reports, GAO has highlighted the challenges the Forest Service faces in protecting the nation against the threat of wildland fire. The agency continues to take steps to improve its approach, but it has yet to take several key steps—including developing a cohesive wildland fire strategy that identifies potential long-term options for reducing hazardous fuels and responding to fires—that, if completed, would substantially strengthen wildland fire management.

Incomplete data on program activities remain a concern. In 2009, GAO concluded that long-standing data problems plagued the Forest Service, hampering its ability to manage its programs and account for its costs. While GAO has not comprehensively reviewed the quality of all Forest Service data, shortcomings identified during several recent reviews reinforce these concerns. For example, GAO recently identified data gaps in the agency's system for tracking appeals and litigation of Forest Service projects and in the number of abandoned hardrock mines on its lands.

Even with improvements, financial and performance accountability shortcomings persist. Although its financial accountability has improved, the Forest Service continues to struggle to implement adequate internal controls over its funds and to demonstrate how its expenditures relate to the goals in the agency's strategic plan. For example, in 2010 Agriculture reported that the agency needed to improve controls over its expenditures for wildland fire management and identified the wildland fire suppression program as susceptible to significant improper payments.

Additional challenges related to program oversight and strategic planning have been identified. Several recent GAO reviews have identified additional challenges facing the Forest Service, which the agency must address if it is to effectively and efficiently fulfill its mission. Specifically, the agency has yet to develop a national land tenure strategy that would protect the public's interest in land exchanges and return fair value to taxpayers from such exchanges. In addition, it has yet to take recommended steps to align its workforce planning with its strategic plan, which may compromise its ability to carry out its mission; for example, it has not adequately planned for the likely retirement of firefighters, which may reduce the agency's ability to protect the safety of both people and property. Finally, the Forest Service needs a more systematic, risk-based approach to allocate its law-enforcement resources. Without such an approach it cannot be assured that it is deploying its resources effectively against illegal activities on the lands it manages.