

WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

Additional Actions Required to Better Identify and Prioritize Lands Needing Fuels Reduction

Why GAO Did This Study

The density of the nation's forests, along with drought and other weather conditions, has fueled wildland fires that have required billions of dollars to suppress and has forced thousands of people to evacuate their homes. The Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Forest Service and the Department of the Interior (Interior) are collaborating on a long-term effort to reduce the risk these fires pose. GAO was asked, among other things, to (1) assess the agencies' efforts to determine which federal lands require fuels reduction treatments, (2) determine how lands are prioritized for treatment, and (3) assess how progress is measured and reported.

What GAO Recommends

To enhance fuels reduction efforts, GAO recommends, among other things, that the Forest Service and Interior (1) collect detailed nationwide data to identify and prioritize which federal lands need fuels reduction and (2) report acres treated to reduce wildfire risk, acres requiring multiyear treatments to reduce wildfire risk, and maintenance acres separately in annual performance reports.

Commenting on the draft report, Interior and USDA agreed that prioritization is essential to program effectiveness, but had concerns about our recommendations on identifying lands and reporting accomplishments.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-805.

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

What GAO Found

The Forest Service and Interior have identified three categories of land for fuels reduction: (1) lands with excess fuels buildup, (2) lands in the wildland-urban interface where federal lands surround or are adjacent to urban development and communities, and (3) lands where vegetation grows rapidly and requires regular maintenance treatments to prevent excess fuels buildup. However, the agencies have not yet reliably estimated the amount or identified the location of these lands. Without identifying these lands there is no baseline against which to assess progress under the fuels reduction program.

Local land management units prioritize lands for fuels reduction using a variety of methods, including professional judgment and ranking systems. Prioritization methods vary, in part, because the Forest Service and Interior have not issued specific national guidance on prioritization. Without specific national guidance on prioritization, it is difficult for the Forest Service and Interior to ensure that the highest priority fuels reduction projects nationwide are being implemented.

A number of factors, including weather and diversion of resources to fire suppression have hindered the Forest Service's and Interior's ability to complete their annual fuels reduction workloads. While agency officials are addressing some of these factors, others, such as weather, are beyond human control. As a result, agency officials are uncertain whether increased funding would necessarily result in a proportional increase in acres treated.

The Forest Service and Interior are developing results-oriented performance measures to assess the effectiveness of treatments in reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires. However, since the agencies have not identified the amount or location of lands with excess fuels buildup, there is currently no baseline from which to assess program performance. In addition, annual performance reports provide misleading information on the overall progress being achieved under the fuels reduction program because the agencies are reporting all acres treated annually without separately reporting on acres that are treated to maintain a low level of wildfire risk and other acres that require several years of treatments to reduce risk.

Fuels Reduction on Forest Service and Interior Lands



Source: NIFC Image Portal (<http://www.nifc.gov>).