



Highlights of [GAO-04-612](#), a report to congressional requesters

WILDFIRE SUPPRESSION

Funding Transfers Cause Project Cancellations and Delays, Strained Relationships, and Management Disruptions

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2003, wildfires burned roughly 4 million acres, destroyed over 5,000 structures, took the lives of 30 firefighters, and cost over \$1 billion to suppress. The substantial expense of fighting wildfires has exceeded the funds appropriated for wildfire suppression nearly every year since 1990. To pay for wildfire suppression costs when the funds appropriated are insufficient, the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of the Interior have transferred funds from their other programs.

GAO was asked to identify (1) the amount of funds transferred and reimbursed for wildfire suppression since 1999, and the programs from which agencies transferred funds; (2) the effects on agency programs from which funds were taken; and (3) alternative approaches that could be considered for estimating annual suppression costs and funding wildfire suppression.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends several measures to minimize the impacts of funding transfers and to improve the estimates on which the agencies base their wildfire budgeting requests. Further, GAO is asking the Congress to consider alternative approaches for funding wildfire suppression.

In commenting on the draft report, Forest Service and Interior generally agreed with the report's findings and recommendations.

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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

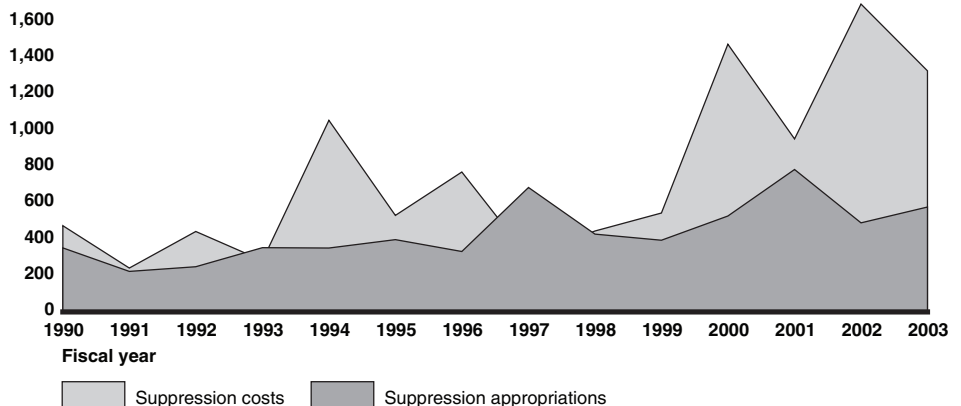
The Forest Service and Interior transferred over \$2.7 billion from other agency programs to help fund wildfire suppression over the last 5 years. On average, the Congress reimbursed agencies about 80 percent of the amounts transferred. Interior primarily used funds from its construction and land acquisition accounts. In recent years, the Forest Service used funds from many different programs; while before 2001, it transferred funds from a single reforestation program/timber sale area restoration trust fund.

Transferring funds for wildfire suppression resulted in canceled and delayed projects, strained relationships with state and local agency partners, and difficulties in managing programs. These impacts affected numerous activities, including fuels reduction and land acquisition. Although transfers were intended to aid fire suppression, some projects that could improve agency capabilities to fight fires, such as purchasing additional equipment, were canceled or delayed. Further, agencies' relationships with states, nonprofit groups, and communities were negatively impacted because agency officials could not fulfill commitments, such as awarding grants. Transfers also disrupted the agencies' ability to manage programs, including annual and long-term budgeting and planning. Although the agencies took some steps to mitigate the impacts of transfers, the effects were widespread and will likely increase if transfers continue.

To better manage the wildfire suppression funding shortfall, the agencies should improve their methods for estimating suppression costs by factoring in recent changes in the costs and uncertainties of fighting wildfires. Also, the Congress could consider alternative funding approaches, such as establishing a governmentwide or agency-specific reserve account.

Wildfire Suppression Costs Have Exceeded Appropriations Almost Every Year since 1990

1,800 Dollars in millions (adjusted for inflation)



Source: GAO analysis of Forest Service and Interior data.