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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-03-308](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Water quality standards are composed of designated uses and criteria. These standards are critical in making accurate, scientifically based determinations about which of the nation's waters are in need of cleanup. To assess EPA and states' actions to improve standards, the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment asked GAO to determine the extent to which (1) states are changing designated uses when necessary and EPA is assisting the states toward that end and (2) EPA is updating its criteria documents and assisting states in establishing criteria that can be compared with reasonably obtainable monitoring data.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Administrator, EPA (1) provide additional guidance regarding use changes, (2) follow through on plans to assess the feasibility of establishing a clearinghouse of approved use changes, (3) set a time frame for developing sedimentation criteria, (4) develop alternative, scientifically defensible monitoring strategies that states can use to determine if water bodies are meeting the criteria, and (5) develop guidance and a training strategy to help EPA regional staff in determining the scientific defensibility of proposed criteria modifications. EPA agreed to give serious consideration to GAO's recommendations and provided several technical comments and clarifications.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-308.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact John B. Stephenson at (202) 512-6225 or stephensonj@gao.gov.

WATER QUALITY

Improved EPA Guidance and Support Can Help States Develop Standards That Better Target Cleanup Efforts

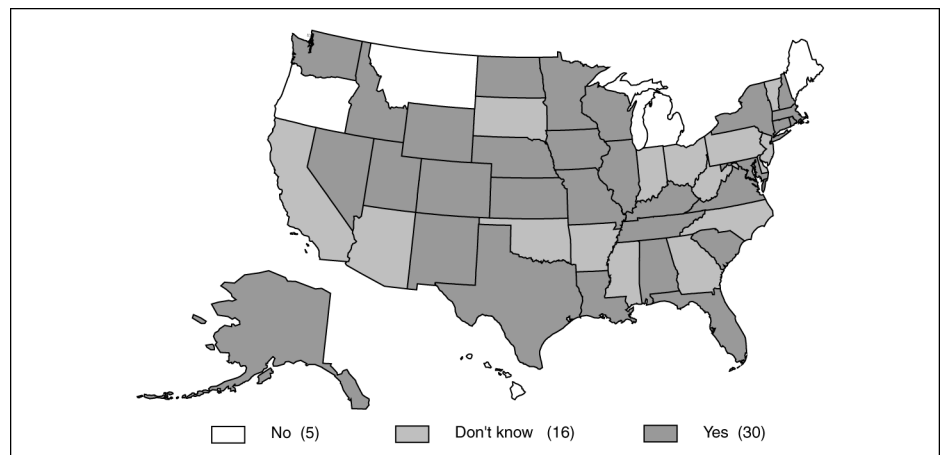
What GAO Found

The extent to which states are changing designated uses varies considerably. Regardless of the number of use changes states have made to date, nearly all states report that some portion of the water bodies within their states currently need changes to their designated uses. Among the key reasons these needed use changes have not been made is states' uncertainty over the circumstances in which use changes are acceptable to EPA and the evidence needed to support those changes.

As required, EPA has developed and published criteria for a wide range of pollutants. However, EPA has not developed criteria for sedimentation or finalized criteria for nutrients—the pollutants that, according to EPA data, account for a relatively large share of the nation's impaired waters. Even when national criteria do exist, some states have difficulty establishing their criteria in such a way that they can be compared with reasonably obtainable monitoring data. In addition, a vast majority of states find it difficult to modify their existing criteria when warranted by new information or other circumstances.

Changing either designated uses or criteria is considered a standards modification. Twenty-two states reported that an improvement in the process of changing designated uses would result in different water bodies being slated for cleanup, and 22 states reported that an improvement in the process of modifying criteria would have that effect. Superimposing the states' responses indicates that 30 states would have different water bodies slated for cleanup with an improvement in the process of modifying standards.

States Reporting That Different Water Bodies Would Be Slated for Cleanup if the Process of Changing Standards Were Improved



Source: GAO.

Note: GAO analysis of state data.