

Highlights of [GAO-11-422T](#), testimony before the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) overarching mission is to protect human health and the environment by implementing and enforcing the laws intended to improve the quality of the nation's air, water, and lands. EPA's policies and programs affect virtually all segments of the economy, society, and government. As such, it operates in a highly complex and controversial regulatory arena.

In recent years, GAO's work has identified several significant and persistent challenges across a range of EPA programs and activities and has proposed corrective actions to enable the agency to more effectively accomplish its mission. Based on this work, this testimony highlights some of the major management challenges facing EPA today, the agency's efforts to address them, and the work GAO believes remains to be done.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made a number of recommendations intended to improve EPA's programs by, for example, improving the information upon which key regulatory decisions are based; improving oversight over enforcement and other key program activities; and improving EPA's coordination with other agencies in program delivery. EPA has concurred with most of the recommendations and has taken steps to implement some of them.

View [GAO-11-422T](#) or key components. For more information, contact David Trimble at (202) 512-3841 or trimbled@gao.gov.

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ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

Major Management Challenges

What GAO Found

On the basis of recent GAO work, key management challenges facing EPA include the following:

- *Improving agencywide management.* EPA has struggled for years to deploy its staff efficiently and in a manner that would do the most good. It has also sought to improve the reliability of its environmental enforcement and other program data, as well as its coordination among EPA offices and with other agencies to improve efficiency and leverage limited resources. Generally, the agency's initiatives in these areas have yet to achieve their intended goals. In this connection, GAO is currently examining the extent to which EPA is taking a coordinated approach in managing its laboratories.
- *Transforming EPA's processes for assessing and controlling toxic chemicals.* EPA has yet to develop sufficient chemical assessment information for limiting public exposure to many chemicals that may pose substantial health risks. As a consequence, GAO in February 2011 reaffirmed the need to transform EPA's process for assessing and controlling toxic chemicals by continuing it as one if GAO's "high-risk" areas warranting increased attention by Congress and the executive branch.
- *Reducing pollution in the nation's waters.* Among the nation's most pressing water quality problems with which EPA and other stakeholders struggle are the contributions of diffuse, or "nonpoint," sources of pollution and the challenges posed by deterioration in the nation's premier watersheds, such as the Chesapeake Bay and Great Lakes. Multibillion-dollar liabilities associated with replacing and upgrading the nation's aging water infrastructure are a looming issue that, if not sufficiently addressed, will impact water quality.
- *Addressing the cost and pace of cleanup at Superfund and other hazardous waste sites.* EPA's Superfund program is intended to ensure the cleanup of hazardous waste sites on both private and public lands. Nonetheless, 30 years after the program began, GAO found that cleanup costs for remaining hazardous waste sites will not only be substantial, but that problems with the accuracy and completeness of data on the amount of remaining cleanup work prevent EPA from reliably estimating these costs.
- *Addressing the agency's emerging role in climate change issues.* As a highly interdisciplinary issue, climate change poses management challenges for the federal government at large. For EPA, particular climate change-related challenges pertain to the legal and administrative barriers facing the agency in its ongoing efforts to reduce carbon emissions, its difficulties in coordinating activities involving numerous other agencies and other levels of government, and its efforts to account for and manage data on greenhouse gas emissions.