



Highlights of [GAO-11-347](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Energy and Environment, Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) operates 37 laboratories to provide the scientific foundation for its mission. Over the past 20 years, independent evaluations have identified problems with the laboratories' operations and management and called for improved planning, coordination, and leadership, as well as consolidation of laboratories. In its 2012 budget, EPA requested \$2 million for another independent study of its laboratories. GAO was asked to examine the extent to which EPA (1) has addressed the findings of prior independent evaluations; (2) uses an agencywide, coordinated approach to manage its laboratory infrastructure and whether its new study will achieve stated cost savings and laboratory improvement goals; and (3) uses a comprehensive planning process to manage its laboratory workforce. GAO reviewed agency documents and independent evaluations, visited EPA laboratories, interviewed agency officials, and examined agency databases.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things that EPA develop a coordinated planning process for its scientific activities and appoint a top-level official with authority over all the laboratories, improve physical and real property planning decisions, and develop a workforce planning process for all laboratories that reflects current and future needs of laboratory facilities. EPA generally agreed with the findings and recommendations.

View [GAO-11-347](#) or key components. For more information, contact David C. Trimble at (202) 512-3841 or trimbled@gao.gov.

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ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

To Better Fulfill Its Mission, EPA Needs a More Coordinated Approach to Managing Its Laboratories

What GAO Found

EPA has not fully addressed the findings and recommendations of independent evaluations of its science activities. For example, EPA has yet to implement an overarching issue-based planning process integrating and coordinating scientific efforts throughout the agency, including the important work of its 37 laboratories as recommended by a 1992 independent evaluation. The agency also has not fully addressed recommendations from a 1994 independent evaluation to consolidate or realign its laboratory facilities and workforce, although several studies found that such action could eliminate unnecessary duplication and improve planning and coordination. In addition, although three independent evaluations identified weaknesses in EPA's scientific leadership, the agency has not appointed a top science official with responsibility and authority over all of the agency's research, science, and technical activities, including integrating and coordinating the science activities conducted by its laboratories. Instead, these activities remain fragmented and largely uncoordinated, reflecting the independent organizational and management structures of the 15 senior officials charged with managing the scientific work performed at each laboratory.

EPA has not taken an agencywide, coordinated approach to managing its scientific efforts and related facilities as part of an interrelated portfolio of facilities, as recommended by the National Research Council. As a result, EPA cannot be assured that it is allocating its limited capital improvement funds most appropriately. EPA officials said they attempt to spread capital improvement funds equitably across the 15 organizations that maintain the laboratories, but this does not ensure that all mission-critical laboratory assets are functioning at an optimal or acceptable level. In 2008, EPA reported that because the laboratories operate independently, opportunities for increased resource sharing and operating efficiencies are inhibited. EPA also has not finalized the scope and methodology to be used for its proposed new laboratory study, and therefore, it is unclear whether the proposed study will produce meaningful change or fulfill the envisioned cost-savings targets. In addition, EPA lacks complete and reliable data about use of laboratory space, condition, and operating costs, and therefore cannot be assured of making informed decisions about capital investments or the disposition of its real property assets.

EPA does not use a comprehensive planning process for managing its laboratories' workforce. To the extent that workforce planning is performed for the laboratories, it is done independently by each of the 15 separate organizations that maintain laboratories. EPA also lacks basic information on its laboratory workload and workforce, including demographic data on the number of federal and contract employees currently working in its 37 laboratories. Such information is essential to identify, on an agencywide basis, any critical skill gaps in its current workforce and the workforce it may need in the future. Without such information, EPA cannot successfully undertake succession planning and management to help the organization adapt to meet emerging and future needs.