GAO Highlights
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Highlights of GAO-03-936T, a testimony before the Subcommittee on Technology, Information Policy, Intergovernmental Relations, and the Census, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

ELECTRONIC RECORDS

Management and Preservation Pose Challenges

Why GAO Did This Study

The difficulties of managing, preserving, and providing access to the vast and rapidly growing volumes of electronic records produced by federal agencies present challenges to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the nation's recordkeeper and archivist. Complex electronic records are being created in volumes that make them difficult to organize and keep accessible. These problems are compounded as computer hardware, application software, and even storage media become obsolete, as they may leave behind electronic records that can no longer be read. As a result, valuable government information may be lost. GAO was requested to testify, among other things, on NARA's recent actions to address the challenges of electronic records management, including its effort to address the problem of preserving electronic records by acquiring an advanced Electronic Records Archive (ERA).

What GAO Found

As reported in GAO's past work, most electronic records—including databases of major federal information systems—remained unscheduled: that is, their value had not been assessed, and their disposition—to destruction or archives—had not been determined. In addition, records of historical value were not being identified and provided to NARA; as a result, they were at risk of loss. NARA has begun to address these problems by taking steps to improve federal records management programs; among other things, it has (1) updated guidance to reflect new types of electronic records, (2) devised a strategy for raising awareness among senior agency management of the importance of good federal records management, and (3) devised a comprehensive approach to improving agency records management that includes inspections and identification of risks and priorities. Through these and other actions, NARA is making progress, but its approach to improving records management does not include provisions for using inspections to evaluate the efficacy of its governmentwide guidance, and an implementation plan for the approach has yet to be established. Without these elements, the risk is increased that federal records management problems will persist.

In addition to its efforts to improve records management, NARA is also acquiring ERA as a means to archive all types of electronic records and make them accessible. GAO found, however, that NARA faces significant challenges in acquiring ERA, a major information system. While NARA has made progress in building its organizational capabilities for acquiring major information systems, it has not developed adequate policies, plans and practices to guide the ERA acquisition or established the means to track the cost and schedule of the project. Unless NARA addresses these and other issues, the ERA system may not meet user expectations, and NARA may not have the information required to control the cost of the system or the time it will take to complete it.

Master Copies of Electronic Records in NARA's Archives

Source: NARA.

United States General Accounting Office