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**Highlights**

Highlights of [GAO-03-430](#), a report to the Chairman, House Committee on Agriculture, and the Chairman, House Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry, Committee on Agriculture

### Why GAO Did This Study

Wildfires burn millions of acres annually. Most burnt land can recover naturally, but a small percentage needs short-term emergency treatment to stabilize burnt land that threatens public safety, property, or ecosystems or longer-term treatments to rehabilitate land unlikely to recover naturally. The Department of the Interior (Interior) and the Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Forest Service—the two departments that manage most federal land—spend millions of dollars annually on such treatments. GAO was asked to (1) describe the two departments' processes for implementing their programs, (2) identify the costs and types of treatments implemented, and (3) determine whether these treatments are effective.

### What GAO Recommends

To ensure effective emergency stabilization and rehabilitation treatments, GAO recommends Interior and USDA (1) specify procedures to be used to monitor treatment effectiveness, including type and extent of monitoring data collected and methods to collect these data, and (2) develop an interagency system to collect, store, and disseminate information on monitoring results.

Commenting on the draft report, Interior and USDA generally agreed they can do more to ensure that funds for emergency stabilization and rehabilitation are used effectively.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-430](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-430).

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Barry Hill at (202) 512-3841 or [hillbt@gao.gov](mailto:hillbt@gao.gov).

## WILDLAND FIRES

### Better Information Needed on Effectiveness of Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation Treatments

#### What GAO Found

Both Interior and USDA's Forest Service use multidisciplinary teams of experts, such as ecologists and soil scientists, to assess damage and potential risks burnt land poses and to develop emergency stabilization and rehabilitation plans that identify needed treatments to reduce or eliminate those risks. The two departments differ in how they manage their programs, however. Interior uses a single process to assess damage and identify treatments for short-term emergency stabilization and longer-term rehabilitation, while USDA's Forest Service uses different processes for each of these two treatment types. The two departments recognize these differences and recently agreed to work toward standardizing certain aspects of their programs, such as definitions and time frames.

Following the 2000 and 2001 fires, the Forest Service obligated \$192 million and Interior \$118 million for 421 emergency stabilization and rehabilitation treatment plans GAO reviewed. Treatments included seeding; fencing; installing soil erosion barriers such as straw bundles, or wattles; and road or trail work. Most of Interior's land—managed by the Bureau of Land Management—consists of rangeland. Thus, the bureau primarily seeded native grasses to retain soils and forage for cattle and wildlife and fenced to prevent grazing. Forest Service land is often steeply sloped and includes watersheds used for drinking water and timber. The Forest Service primarily seeded fast-growing grasses and built soil erosion barriers for emergency stabilization, and worked on roads, trails and reforested for rehabilitation.

Neither the departments nor GAO could determine whether emergency stabilization and rehabilitation treatments were achieving their intended results. The departments require that treatments be monitored, but they do not specify how and the type of data to collect or analyze for determining effectiveness. The departments have stressed the need to systematically collect and share monitoring data for treatment decisions. Yet neither has developed a national interagency system to do so. Therefore, the nature and extent of data collection, analysis, and sharing vary widely. The departments recognize that they need better information on treatment effectiveness. However, they have not yet committed to this effort.



Source: GAO.

Bundles of Straw, or Wattles, Used as Erosion Barriers on Steep Slopes.