

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-217T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Wildland fires play an important ecological role on the landscape, but they cost billions each year, result in loss of life, and cause damage to homes and other structures. The Forest Service and Interior are responsible for wildland fire management on federal lands, including acquiring firefighting assets such as large airtankers to assist in fire suppression activities. Increased fire intensity has prompted efforts aimed at implementing more effective fire management strategies.

Understanding the effectiveness of these efforts takes on heightened importance given that the Forest Service and Interior have obligated \$8.3 billion to suppress wildland fires in fiscal years 2009 through 2014.

This testimony is based on GAO reports issued in September 2015 and August 2013. It focuses on (1) how the federal wildland fire agencies assess the effectiveness of their wildland fire management programs and (2) Forest Service efforts to modernize the large airtanker fleet and challenges it faces in doing so. For the 2015 report, GAO reviewed agency performance measures and other ways the agencies assess effectiveness. For the 2013 report, GAO reviewed large airtanker planning and acquisition documents. GAO also conducted selected updates by reviewing documentation and interviewing officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommended in September 2015 that the agencies develop specific criteria for reviewing wildland fires. The agencies generally agreed. GAO is not making any new recommendations in this testimony.

View [GAO-16-217T](#). For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell at (202) 512-3841 or fennella@gao.gov

November 17, 2015

WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

Agencies' Efforts to Assess Program Effectiveness and Modernize the Firefighting Aviation Fleet

What GAO Found

As GAO found in its September 2015 report, the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service and the Department of the Interior assess the effectiveness of their wildland fire management programs in several ways, including through performance measures, evaluations of particular activities, and reviews of specific wildland fires. Forest Service and Interior officials told GAO their performance measures need to be improved and that they are working to do so. For example, in fiscal year 2014, the Forest Service began developing a performance measure intended to reflect that, in some cases, allowing naturally-ignited fires to burn can provide natural resource benefits at a lower cost and lower risk to personnel than fully suppressing the fire as quickly as possible. Officials told GAO they plan to finalize the measure and use it in 2017. In addition, Forest Service and Interior have undertaken efforts to evaluate particular wildland fire management activities, such as efforts to reduce potentially hazardous vegetation that can fuel fires, known as fuel reduction, and assess the performance of firefighting aircraft. However, GAO's 2015 report found that the Forest Service and Interior conducted reviews to assess their effectiveness in responding to wildland fire, but did not consistently follow agency policy which generally directs them to review each fire involving federal expenditures of \$10 million or more. Forest Service and Interior officials told GAO that this policy overly emphasized the cost of wildland fire suppression rather than the effectiveness of their response to fires. However, the Forest Service and Interior have not established specific criteria for selecting fires for review and conducting the reviews. For example Forest Service officials told GAO the agency judgmentally selects incidents to review based on broad criteria such as complexity and national significance. By developing specific criteria, GAO concluded that the agencies may enhance their ability to help ensure that their fire reviews provide useful information about the effectiveness of their wildland fire activities.

In its August 2013 report, GAO found that the Forest Service faced challenges in modernizing the government's fleet of large airtankers—which had declined from 44 in 2002 to 8 in 2013—but since that report the agency has increased the availability of such aircraft. GAO found in 2013 that the Forest Service, which is responsible for contracting for large airtankers, planned to modernize the fleet by obtaining large airtankers from various sources over the near, medium, and long term, but that each component of that approach faced challenges, making the continued availability of such aircraft to meet fire suppression needs uncertain. For example, for the medium term, the Forest Service had awarded contracts for seven "next-generation" large airtankers, but as of August 2013 only one had completed necessary federal approval and certification processes. Since that report, Forest Service officials told GAO that the agency has increased the availability of large airtankers. Specifically, as of November 2015, the agency had contracted for 20 privately-owned large airtankers, and another 7 large airtankers are to be transferred to Forest Service ownership from the Coast Guard.