



Highlights of [GAO-07-1017T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, Committee on Natural Resources, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Increasing wildland fire threats to communities and ecosystems, combined with rising costs of addressing those threats—trends that GAO and others have reported on for many years—have not abated. On average, the acreage burned annually by wildland fires from 2000 to 2005 was 70 percent greater than the acreage burned annually during the 1990s. Annual appropriations to prepare for and respond to wildland fires have also increased substantially over the past decade, totaling about \$3 billion in recent years. The Forest Service within the Department of Agriculture and four agencies within the Department of the Interior (Interior) are responsible for responding to wildland fires on federal lands.

This testimony summarizes several key actions that federal agencies need to complete or take to strengthen their management of the wildland fire program, including the need to (1) develop a long-term, cohesive strategy to reduce fuels and address wildland fire problems and (2) improve the management of their efforts to contain the costs of preparing for and responding to wildland fires. The testimony is based on several previous GAO reports and testimonies addressing wildland fire issues.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-1017T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

A Cohesive Strategy and Clear Cost-Containment Goals Are Needed for Federal Agencies to Manage Wildland Fire Activities Effectively

What GAO Found

The Forest Service and Interior agencies need to complete several actions to strengthen their overall management of the wildland fire program. First, because a substantial investment and decades of work will be required to address wildland fire problems that have been decades in the making, the agencies need a cohesive strategy that addresses the full range of wildland fire management activities. Such a strategy should identify the available long-term options and associated funding for reducing excess vegetation and responding to wildland fires if the agencies and the Congress are to make informed decisions about an effective and affordable long-term approach for addressing wildland fire problems. GAO first recommended in 1999 that such a strategy be developed to address the problem of excess fuels and their potential to increase the severity of wildland fires and cost of suppression efforts. By 2005, the agencies had yet to develop such a strategy, and GAO reiterated the need for a cohesive strategy and broadened the recommendation's focus to better address the interrelated nature of fuel reduction efforts and wildland fire response. Further, because the agencies said they would be unable to develop a cohesive strategy until they have completed certain key tasks, GAO recommended that the agencies develop a tactical plan outlining these tasks and the time frames needed for completing each task and a cohesive strategy. Although the agencies concurred with GAO's recommendations, as of April 2007, they had yet to develop a tactical plan.

Second, as GAO testified before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources in January 2007, the steps the Forest Service and Interior agencies have taken to date to contain wildland fire costs lack several key elements fundamental to sound program management, such as clearly defining cost-containment goals, developing a strategy for achieving those goals, and measuring progress toward achieving them. For cost-containment efforts to be effective, the agencies need to integrate cost-containment goals with the other goals of the wildland fire program—such as protecting life, resources, and property—and to recognize that trade-offs will be needed to meet desired goals within the context of fiscal constraints. Further, because cost-containment goals need to be considered in relation to other wildland fire program goals, it is important that the agencies integrate cost-containment goals within an overall cohesive strategy. GAO's forthcoming report on federal agencies' efforts to contain wildland fire costs includes more-detailed findings and recommendations to the agencies to improve the management of their cost-containment efforts; this report is expected to be released at a Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources hearing scheduled for June 26, 2007.