

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-453](#), a report to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Puget Sound is the nation's second-largest estuary and serves as an important economic engine in Washington State, supporting millions of people, major industries, and a wide variety of species. However, according to the CCMP, human use and development have degraded water quality and habitats and harmed critical species such as salmon.

GAO was asked to review efforts to restore Puget Sound. This report examines, among other objectives, (1) Puget Sound restoration efforts and related expenditures for fiscal years 2012 through 2016, (2) how federal and nonfederal entities coordinate their restoration efforts, and (3) the framework for assessing progress toward Puget Sound restoration. GAO reviewed restoration plans and other documentation, conducted a two-phase survey of the more than 25 federal and state entities that GAO determined had participated in restoration efforts, conducted discussion groups with tribal and local representatives, and interviewed representatives from these federal and nonfederal entities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations, including that EPA work with the management conference to help ensure that measurable targets are developed where possible for the highest priority indicators currently lacking such targets. EPA agreed with GAO's recommendations and highlighted steps the agency has begun taking and plans to take to address the recommendations.

View [GAO-18-453](#). For more information, contact J. Alfredo Gómez at (202) 512-3841 or gomezj@gao.gov.

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PUGET SOUND RESTORATION

Additional Actions Could Improve Assessments of Progress

What GAO Found

Through its survey of federal and Washington State entities, GAO identified numerous federal and state efforts that, in whole or in part, supported Puget Sound restoration from fiscal years 2012 through 2016. The efforts involved a variety of activities, including habitat protection, water quality improvement, and monitoring. Some of these efforts focused exclusively on Puget Sound restoration, while others had a broader geographic or programmatic scope. Funding for these efforts came from a variety of sources, such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which reported expending about \$142 million for activities in Puget Sound through the National Estuary Program and the Puget Sound Geographic Program during this time frame. However, total expenditures for all efforts are unknown, in part because of difficulties isolating expenditures specific to Puget Sound. A 2017 state audit recommended that two state agencies develop a plan to create a more complete inventory of restoration efforts and related funding. The state agencies concurred and have plans to develop this inventory by August 2019.

Federal and nonfederal entities coordinate restoration efforts through two primary interagency groups. First, the state-led Puget Sound Management Conference has developed a comprehensive conservation and management plan (CCMP), approved by EPA under the National Estuary Program, that serves as the primary planning document for Puget Sound restoration. Second, the Puget Sound Federal Task Force complements the work of the management conference by coordinating the efforts of federal agencies to support the CCMP, including by developing a draft Federal Action Plan that identifies priority federal actions to protect and restore Puget Sound.

The CCMP lays out a framework for assessing restoration progress, including 6 goals, 47 indicators, and recovery targets for 31 of the indicators. In 2017, the Puget Sound Partnership, a state agency, reported that progress had been made in some areas, but many key indicators had not shown improvement. For example:

- One indicator that showed improvement was acres of harvestable shellfish beds, which the Partnership reported increased from 2007 to 2016.
- One indicator that showed no improvement was the abundance of Puget Sound Chinook salmon populations, which the Partnership reported remained below desired levels.

The Partnership also reported that most of the 31 recovery targets that the management conference has adopted for 2020 are not likely to be attained. However, the Partnership's ability to assess progress has been limited in some instances, in part because the management conference has not developed targets for 16 of the 47 indicators. GAO has identified measurable targets as a key attribute of successful performance measures. By working with the management conference to help ensure that measurable targets are developed where possible for the highest priority indicators currently lacking such targets, EPA would better position the Partnership to assess progress toward restoration goals.