

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-150](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Hundreds of tribal environmental programs operate across the nation to protect human health and safeguard the environment. Many of these programs are supported, at least in part, by EPA grants. Some tribes have raised concerns that a lack of resources threatens their ability to operate tribal environmental programs.

GAO was asked to review EPA grants to tribes. This report examines (1) the amount and types of grants EPA awarded to tribes for fiscal years 2014 through 2019; (2) how tribes used these grants; and (3) challenges EPA and tribes identified in addressing environmental concerns through grants, and EPA's actions to address these challenges. GAO reviewed laws, policies, and grant documentation; assessed EPA data on the types and amount of grants provided to tribes; and interviewed EPA officials as well as 10 tribes and one intertribal consortium selected to highlight different EPA regions and grant types, for nongeneralizable information about EPA grants and related challenges.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations to EPA, including that EPA update guidance on PPGs. EPA agreed with three recommendations and disagreed with two, noting that it believes it has already taken actions that address these recommendations. GAO continues to believe the recommendations are warranted, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-21-150](#). For more information, contact J. Alfredo Gomez at (202) 512-3841 or gomezj@gao.gov or Anna Maria Ortiz at ortiza@gao.gov.

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EPA GRANTS TO TRIBES

Additional Actions Needed to Effectively Address Tribal Environmental Concerns

What GAO Found

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) awarded over \$985 million to Indian tribes through 43 different grant programs from fiscal years 2014 through 2019, according to agency data from EPA's Integrated Grants Management System. For example, EPA awarded grants for the Indian Environmental General Assistance Program—which assists tribes in developing their environmental programs—and for programs to prevent air and water pollution directly to tribes.

Tribes used EPA grants to support a variety of activities. For example, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe in Colorado told GAO it has used EPA grant funding to monitor methane emissions and help reduce this greenhouse gas. The equipment on the tribe's vehicle, shown below, identifies methane leaks from broken pipes. The Jicarilla Apache Nation in New Mexico uses an EPA grant to educate its community and others across the country about the dangers of radon—a naturally occurring radioactive gas that can cause cancer—and how to mitigate exposure. Jicarilla Apache officials told GAO that radon exposure is a priority for the tribe because of above-average cancer rates.

Mobile Methane Detection Equipment Funded by an Environmental Protection Agency Grant to the Southern Ute Indian Tribe



Source: Southern Ute Indian Tribe. | GAO-21-150

EPA and tribal officials whom GAO interviewed identified financial, staffing, and communication challenges to addressing tribal environmental concerns through EPA grants. The most common challenge identified by EPA and tribes was stagnating or declining amounts directed by congressional committees or allocated by EPA for certain grants. EPA has taken some actions to address this challenge, such as by promoting the use of Performance Partnership Grants (PPG). These allow tribes to combine grant awards, thus providing greater flexibility to address financial gaps. However, EPA best practices guidance on PPGs is limited and outdated. EPA staff in some regions restricted the movement of funds between grants in a PPG, although the regulation allows for such movement. EPA officials said they are studying the use of PPGs but did not have plans to update the agency's best practices guidance. Updating this guidance could help ensure EPA staff more consistently allow the movement of funds between grants in a PPG, thereby increasing funding flexibilities for tribes to address their environmental concerns.