

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106157](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Millions of Americans do not have broadband access, which has become essential for online activities like work, school, and health care. With the federal government investing billions of dollars in expanding access in the coming years, new broadband infrastructure will frequently cross federal lands or connect to federal buildings, which requires a federal permit. Legislation requires that executive agencies process applications for communications use permits—including for broadband infrastructure—within 270 days of receipt.

GAO was asked to review issues related to processing federal broadband permits. This report examines the extent to which selected agencies (1) used reliable data to track application processing times for communications use permits; and (2) processed communications use applications by the required deadline.

GAO analyzed federal permitting data; reviewed laws and reports on the application review process; and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations—three to BLM and three to Forest Service—to improve their processing of communications use applications, so that they are better able to meet the 270-day deadline. BLM and the Forest Service agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106157](#). For more information, contact Andrew Von Ah at (202) 512-2834 or VonAhA@gao.gov.

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BROADBAND DEPLOYMENT

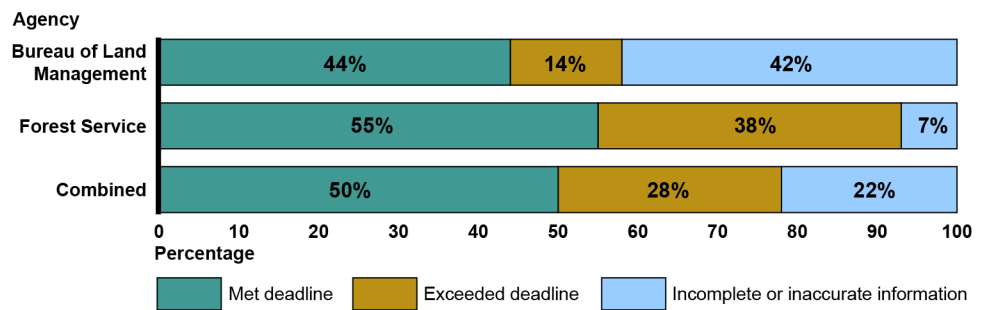
Agencies Should Take Steps to Better Meet Deadline for Processing Permits

What GAO Found

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Forest Service process the most applications from telecommunications providers to install communications use equipment or facilities—including for broadband internet—on federal property. However, GAO found that from fiscal years 2018 through 2022, BLM and Forest Service did not have sufficiently reliable—i.e., accurate and complete data—to determine the processing time for 42 percent and 7 percent, respectively, of their communications use applications. These agencies lacked the necessary controls to ensure staff entered key information, such as start and end dates, in their electronic systems. Without accurate, complete data to determine processing times, the agencies cannot track the extent to which they are complying with the statutory requirement that they grant or deny applications within 270 days.

For those communications use applications with sufficient data, BLM and Forest Service reduced their average processing time by 57 percent from fiscal years 2018 through 2022. However, despite this overall improvement, about half of the applications either exceeded the 270-day deadline or did not have sufficiently accurate and complete information to determine if they met the deadline.

Selected Agencies' Performance in Processing Communications Use Permit Applications Within the 270-Day Deadline, Fiscal Years 2018—2022



Source: GAO analysis of Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service data. | GAO-24-106157

Officials from BLM and Forest Service said that applicant non-responsiveness and staffing issues contributed to the delays in processing communications use applications. Forest Service has taken some steps to improve processing, including hiring additional staff, but neither agency has fully analyzed or addressed reasons why many applications processing time exceeded the deadline. Moreover, neither agency has a method to alert staff to applications that are at risk of exceeding the 270-day deadline. Until BLM and Forest Service address issues that contribute to delays and establish methods to flag at-risk applications, the agencies may continue to miss the deadline at similar rates, which could cause delays and increased costs in deploying needed broadband infrastructure.