

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106823](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Plastic products account for approximately 70 to 80 percent of all waste that ends up in the environment, according to a National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine report. In August 2022, the White House issued executive order implementing instructions that directed agencies to reduce single-use plastic products to the maximum extent practicable.

The Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes a provision for GAO to study DOD's efforts to reduce its reliance on single-use plastics. This report assesses the extent to which DOD (1) has taken actions in response to the implementing instructions to reduce single-use plastics, and (2) has visibility into ongoing sustainability efforts by its components involving the reduction of single-use plastics.

GAO selected for review a sample of DOD components with efforts involving single-use plastics. GAO analyzed documents, interviewed officials, and collected and assessed information related to components' ongoing sustainability efforts. GAO visited two DOD installations to observe how sustainability efforts involve single-use plastic reductions.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that DOD issue department-wide guidance for reducing single-use plastics; that the guidance specify goals, roles, and responsibilities; and that DOD review and evaluate components' ongoing efforts. DOD concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106823](#). For more information, contact Alissa H. Czyz at (202) 512-3058 or czyza@gao.gov.

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ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

DOD Should Take Actions to Reduce Single-Use Plastics

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) has not taken actions directly in response to Executive Order 14057's implementing instructions to reduce single-use plastics. For the purposes of GAO's report, such plastics are defined as those intended to be used once and then discarded regardless of whether they are recycled or disposed of in a landfill.

Examples of Department of Defense (DOD) Activities Involving Single-Use Plastics

DOD activity	Types of single-use plastics
Commissaries	Plastic bags, grocery product packaging
Exchanges and lodging	Plastic bags, product packaging, health and beauty products
Dining facilities	Cutlery, plastic plates, to-go containers
General acquisition and procurement	Bubble wrap, plastic shrink wrap
Logistics	Oil/lubricant bottles, packaging of parts and supplies
Hospitals	Masks; disposable containers, gowns, and curtains; single-use medical devices with plastic components

Source: GAO analysis of DOD information. | [GAO-24-106823](#)

Officials from the military departments, the exchanges, the Defense Commissary Agency, and the Defense Logistics Agency said they were unsure how to identify single-use plastics within DOD, measure any reductions, and establish roles and responsibilities for responding to the implementing instructions. These officials stated that they typically wait for department-wide guidance before acting in response to executive orders and any instructions to ensure that their actions align with department-wide goals. Issuing department-wide guidance on which plastics to reduce—including associated goals, roles, and responsibilities for components—would better position DOD to reduce its single-use plastic waste, as envisioned by the executive order's implementing instructions.

For at least a decade, selected DOD components have had sustainability efforts that involved the reduction of single-use plastics. These ongoing efforts include

- use of reusable dishware and cutlery at some military dining facilities,
- a program to refurbish and reuse some single-use medical devices, and
- educational initiatives.

However, GAO found that DOD has limited visibility into the results and challenges of component-level efforts. DOD officials stated that they have not comprehensively reviewed these efforts because the issue of single-use plastics is new, based on the August 2022 executive order implementing instructions. However, many of the component-level efforts GAO examined predate the executive order and its implementing instructions and could inform any future DOD efforts in response to them. By collecting information about components' ongoing efforts and evaluating their results and challenges, DOD can leverage components' existing knowledge and experiences as it establishes future department-wide guidance for reducing single-use plastics.