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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-04-192T](#), testimony before the Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife, and Oceans, Committee on Resources, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The 95-million acres in the National Wildlife Refuge System are the only federal lands primarily devoted to the conservation and management of fish, wildlife, and plant resources. While the federal government owns the surface lands in the system, in many cases private parties own the subsurface mineral rights and have the legal authority to explore for and extract oil and gas. This testimony is based on an August 2003 report (GAO-03-517) in which GAO determined the extent of oil and gas activity on refuges, identified the environmental effects, and assessed the Fish and Wildlife Service's management and oversight of those activities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO's August 2003 report made recommendations to improve management and oversight of oil and gas activities, including having the Department of the Interior seek from Congress any necessary additional authority to ensure consistent and reasonable management of all oil and gas activities on refuges. In commenting on the report, the department generally did not address our recommendations, but did raise procedural concerns about GAO's recommendation that it seek additional authority from Congress. Given these concerns, GAO also raised this matter to Congress for its consideration.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-192T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Barry T. Hill at (202) 512-3841 or hillbt@gao.gov.

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES

Improvement Needed in the Management and Oversight of Oil and Gas Activities on Federal Lands

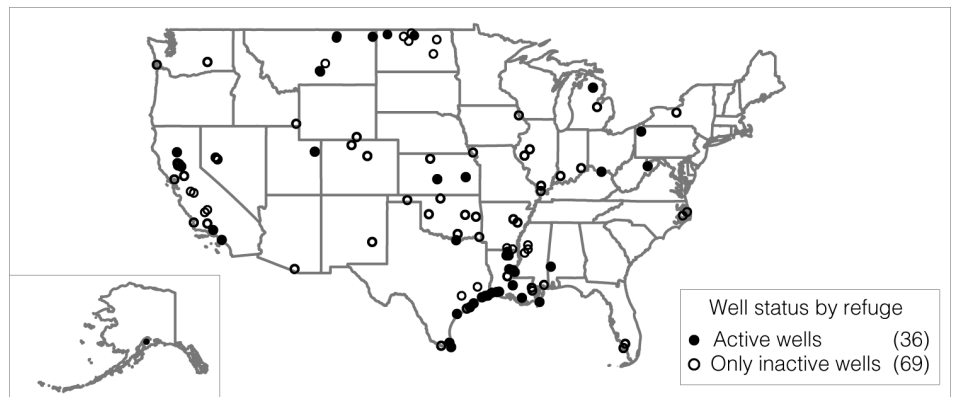
What GAO Found

About one-quarter (155 of 575) of all refuges have past or present oil and gas activities, some dating to at least the 1920s. Activities range from exploration to drilling and production to pipelines transiting refuge lands. One hundred five refuges contain a total of 4,406 oil and gas wells—2,600 inactive wells and 1,806 active wells. The 1,806 wells, located at 36 refuges, many around the Gulf Coast (see figure), produced oil and gas valued at \$880 million during the last 12-month reporting period, roughly 1 percent of domestic production. Thirty-five refuges contain only pipelines.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has not assessed the cumulative environmental effects of oil and gas activities on refuges. Available studies, anecdotal information, and GAO's observations show that the environmental effects of oil and gas activities vary from negligible, such as effects from buried pipelines, to substantial, such as effects from large oil spills or from large-scale infrastructure. These effects also vary from the temporary to the longer term. Some of the most detrimental effects of oil and gas activities have been reduced through environmental laws and improved practices and technology. Moreover, oil and gas operators have taken steps, in some cases voluntarily, to reverse damages resulting from oil and gas activities.

Federal management and oversight of oil and gas activities varies widely among refuges—some refuges take extensive measures, while others exercise little control or enforcement. GAO found that this variation occurs because of differences in authority to oversee private mineral rights and because refuge managers lack enough guidance, resources, and training to properly manage and oversee oil and gas activities. Greater attention to oil and gas activities by the Fish and Wildlife Service would increase its understanding of associated environmental effects and contribute to more consistent use of practices and technologies that protect refuge resources.

National Wildlife Refuges with Oil and Gas Wells



Source: Premier Data Services (data) and GAO (analysis).