



Highlights of [GAO-09-68](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Wildland fires have become increasingly damaging and costly. To deal with fire's threats, the five federal wildland fire agencies—the Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture and four agencies in the Department of the Interior (Interior)—rely on thousands of firefighters, fire engines, and other assets. To ensure acquisition of the best mix of these assets, the agencies in 2002 began developing a new interagency budget tool known as fire program analysis (FPA). FPA underwent major changes in 2006, raising questions about its ability to meet its original objectives. GAO was asked to examine (1) FPA's development to date, including the 2006 changes, and (2) the extent to which FPA will meet its objectives. To do so, GAO reviewed agency policies and FPA documentation and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending, among other things, that the agencies develop a strategic plan for the continued development of FPA and provide Congress with annual updates on (1) their progress in completing the steps outlined in that plan and (2) how they used FPA in developing their budgets. Interior disagreed with the need to develop a strategic plan. In response to Forest Service and Interior comments on GAO findings on FPA's cost-effectiveness approach, GAO's recommendation to develop a strategic plan was revised to provide more flexibility. The agencies generally concurred with the other recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-68](#). For more information, contact Robin Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

Interagency Budget Tool Needs Further Development to Fully Meet Key Objectives

What GAO Found

FPA is both a computer model and a broader management system for developing the five agencies' wildland fire budget requests and allocating funds. FPA is intended to allow the agencies to analyze potential combinations of firefighting assets and potential strategies for reducing vegetation and fighting fires to determine the most cost-effective mix of assets and strategies. The agencies began developing FPA in 2002 and completed the first part of the model in October 2004. As the agencies began using FPA, however, agency officials raised concerns about its underlying science and the extent to which it met agency management and policy objectives. As a result, in 2006 the agencies conducted a review of FPA, which questioned FPA's basic modeling approach. The agencies made substantial changes to FPA after the review, some of which followed from the review's recommendations. For example, as recommended, the agencies established a new oversight body comprising senior agency leaders. The agencies also made fundamental changes to FPA's modeling approach for analyzing the firefighting assets needed to respond to fires, but these changes went beyond the review's recommendations and, despite FPA's importance and cost, the reasons for these changes were not fully documented. The agencies expected to complete the FPA model in November 2008—about a year later than initially estimated—and to begin using FPA's results in spring 2009 to develop their fiscal year 2011 budget requests, a delay of about 3 years from their initial goal of using FPA's preliminary results in 2006. FPA is expected to cost about \$54 million to develop.

Although it is not yet complete and GAO conducted only a limited review of its available components, FPA shows promise in achieving some of the key objectives originally established for it; nevertheless, the approach the agencies have taken hampers FPA from meeting other key objectives. Among the most important objectives, FPA will (1) provide a common framework for the five federal agencies to analyze firefighting assets and develop budget requests across agency jurisdictions, (2) analyze the most important fire management activities, and (3) recognize the presence of certain nonfederal firefighting assets that may be available to respond to fires on federal land. FPA falls short, however, with respect to other key objectives. First, FPA has limited ability to project the effects of different levels of vegetation reduction treatments and firefighting strategies over time, meaning that agency officials lack information that could help them analyze the long-term impact of changes in their approach to wildland fire management. Second, the modeling approach the agencies are taking cannot identify the most cost-effective mix and location of federal firefighting assets for a given budget but, rather, analyzes a limited number of combinations of assets and strategies to identify the most cost-effective among them. More broadly, the current FPA approach involves considerable discretion on the part of agency officials, increasing the importance of making decisions in a transparent manner so that Congress, the public, and officials throughout the agencies understand FPA's role in budget development and allocation.