



Highlights of [GAO-06-917](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Transportation's (DOT) research, development, and technology (RD&T) budget totaled \$1.1 billion in fiscal year 2005. DOT's Research and Innovative Technology Administration (RITA)—which includes the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS)—oversees DOT's RD&T activities. GAO examined (1) how RITA's responsibilities for overseeing DOT's RD&T activities differ from those of its predecessor, the Research and Special Programs Administration (RSPA); (2) RITA's practices for coordinating, facilitating, and reviewing RD&T activities; (3) the progress DOT has made in implementing GAO's 2003 recommendations on how to improve the coordination and evaluation of RD&T activities; and (4) how BTS identifies and monitors how well it serves its users. To address these issues, GAO reviewed relevant documentation and interviewed officials from RITA, BTS, and three operating administrations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes several recommendations to DOT to enhance RITA's ability to manage and ensure the effectiveness of RD&T activities. These include (1) developing performance goals, an implementing strategy, and an evaluation plan for RITA; and (2) developing a systematic process for BTS to identify its primary users and solicit and incorporate feedback from those users. DOT generally agreed with the findings and recommendations in this report.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-917.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Mathew Scire at (202) 512-2834 or sciremj@gao.gov.

TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH

Opportunities for Improving the Oversight of DOT's Research Programs and User Satisfaction with Transportation Statistics

What GAO Found

In 2005, RITA took over RSPA's responsibilities for overseeing DOT's RD&T activities when RSPA was dissolved. While RITA's mission and strategic objectives are similar to those RSPA had, RITA differs from RSPA in a number of ways. For example, RITA proposed a \$2 million increase in its fiscal year 2007 budget request for the oversight of DOT's RD&T activities through its proposed Transportation Futures and Applied Technology Program, which, among other things, would provide access to technical experts to RITA on a contract basis. Additionally, RITA's responsibility for evaluation is less clearly defined than RSPA's. RITA, unlike RSPA, is not required to measure the results or evaluate the effectiveness of RD&T activities. However, RITA is not explicitly prevented from evaluating such activities.

RITA coordinates, facilitates, and reviews DOT's RD&T activities through various practices. For example, RITA has two coordinating bodies—the RD&T Planning Council and the RD&T Planning Team—and conducts budget reviews, among other practices. RITA has not, however, established performance goals, a clear implementing strategy, or an evaluation plan that delineates how its coordination, facilitation, and review practices will further DOT's mission or ensure the effectiveness of its RD&T investment. Without such a strategic approach, it is difficult for RITA to ensure that DOT is making the most of its approximately \$1 billion annual RD&T investment.

RITA has partially implemented four of our recommendations and has not implemented the other. For example, while RITA, through its two coordinating bodies, has taken some action to review RD&T activities for duplication and opportunities for joint efforts, RITA has not established the scope of RD&T activities to be reviewed, the methodology of the review, or how the results will be used to make decisions about future RD&T activities.

BTS does not have a systematic process for identifying its primary users, soliciting ongoing feedback from those users, and determining whether or how that feedback should be incorporated. For example, rather than identify specific users of BTS data products and services, BTS considers its users to be those broad categories of intended users described in federal legislation. Further, rather than routinely soliciting user feedback on all data products and services, such as through a customer satisfaction survey, BTS only solicits limited feedback from some users of specific products through conferences, workshops, or other meetings. Finally, BTS relies on its program managers to evaluate and determine how best to address feedback from its users; however, the managers are not required to—and often do not—report the results of whether or how they considered user feedback. Without a systematic process for identifying its users, soliciting ongoing feedback, and determining whether or how that feedback should be incorporated, BTS is limited in its ability to consider feedback and use it to make improvements to data products.