FOREST SERVICE

Vegetation Management Projects Approved during Calendar Years 2003 through 2005 Using Categorical Exclusions

Why GAO Did This Study

The Forest Service manages over 192 million acres of land, often conducting a variety of vegetation management projects such as thinning trees. Before approving projects that may significantly affect the environment, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) generally requires the Forest Service to prepare an environmental assessment (EA) or an environmental impact statement (EIS). However, the Forest Service can decide not to prepare an EA or EIS if the project involves categories of activities that it previously found to have no significant environmental effect (categorical exclusions). As of 2003, the Forest Service had established one such exclusion affecting vegetation management projects and has since added four new ones.

This testimony is based on GAO's report, *Forest Service: Use of Categorical Exclusions for Vegetation Management Projects, Calendar Years 2003 through 2005* (GAO-07-99). For vegetation management during these years, GAO determined (1) how many projects the Forest Service approved, including those approved using categorical exclusions; (2) which categorical exclusions it used to approve projects; and (3) if categorical exclusions are not being used in any field offices, why. To answer these questions, GAO surveyed Forest Service officials at all 155 national forests.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-1016T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.
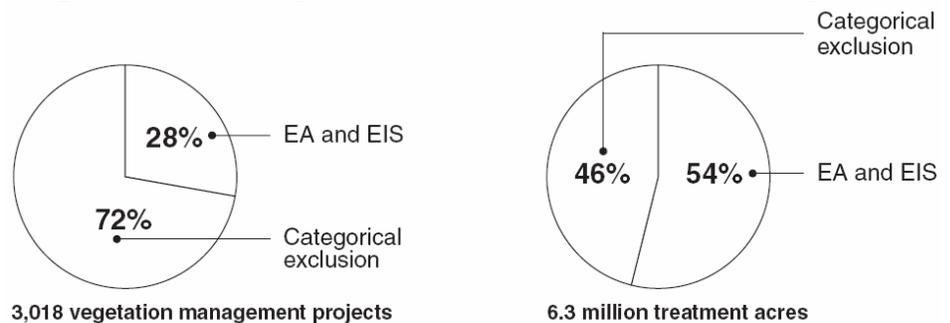
What GAO Found

The Forest Service approved 3,018 vegetation management projects to treat about 6.3 million acres during calendar years 2003 through 2005. Of these projects, the agency approved about 28 percent using an EA or EIS to treat about 3.4 million acres, while it approved the remainder using categorical exclusions. Although 72 percent of the projects were approved using categorical exclusions, these projects accounted for less than half—46 percent—of the total treatment acres. Forest Service officials said that the number and size of projects and types of environmental analyses used varied, depending upon forest size, ecology, and location.

Percentage of Vegetation Management Projects and Treatment Acres Approved Using an EA, EIS, or Categorical Exclusion, Calendar Years 2003 through 2005

Source: GAO.

Of the vegetation management projects approved using categorical exclusions, half were approved using a categorical exclusion for improving timber stands or wildlife habitat, an exclusion in place before 2003. The agency used the newer four categorical exclusions for approving the remainder. Of these four, the agency primarily used the categorical exclusion for reducing hazardous fuels, followed by those for salvaging dead or dying trees, conducting limited harvests of live trees, and removing trees to control the spread of insects or disease. The projects approved using the categorical exclusion to improve timber stands or wildlife habitat accounted for about 2.4 million of the 2.9 million acres to be treated under projects approved using one of the five categorical exclusions.

About 11 percent of the Forest Service's 509 field offices had not used any of the five vegetation management categorical exclusions during the 3-year period. The reasons why field offices had not used a specific categorical exclusion varied by office location and categorical exclusion. For example, a majority of the field offices—about 91 percent—had not used the categorical exclusion for the removal of trees to control the spread of insects or disease, primarily because these offices did not have a sufficient number of insect- or disease-infested trees. About 32 percent of the field offices had not used the categorical exclusion to improve timber stands or wildlife habitat, primarily because no projects of this type had been undertaken during the 3-year period.

_____**United States Government Accountability Office**