



Highlights of [GAO-04-652](#), a report to congressional requesters

FEDERAL LAND MANAGEMENT

Additional Guidance on Community Involvement Could Enhance Effectiveness of Stewardship Contracting

Why GAO Did This Study

In their efforts to reduce hazardous fuels and the risk of wildfire on the nation's public lands, the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) expect that stewardship contracting will play a major role. Stewardship contracting involves the use of contracting authorities—such as the exchange of goods for services—first authorized in 1998 and intended to help the agencies achieve land management goals that meet community needs. GAO was asked, among other things, to determine (1) the contracting and financial controls the agencies use to ensure accountability in managing stewardship contracting projects and (2) the steps the agencies have taken to involve communities in the projects.

What GAO Recommends

To enhance the effectiveness of stewardship contracting and improve public trust in the agencies, GAO recommends that the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior direct the agencies to issue additional guidance on community involvement identifying best practices in seeking and incorporating community input, and establish minimum requirements for seeking involvement on each project.

In commenting on a draft of this report, the Forest Service generally agreed with its contents. The Department of the Interior did not provide comments.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-652.

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

What GAO Found

Although the Forest Service provided limited initial guidance on establishing contracting and financial controls, the eight stewardship projects GAO visited had incorporated such controls. (BLM was first granted stewardship authority in 2003 and had no projects under way at the time of GAO's review.) The projects generally used pre- and post-award controls, such as reviews of contractor bids using preestablished criteria, and performance and payment bonds to ensure completion of required activities. GAO's review of selected financial controls at the projects we visited showed that they appeared to have procedures in place to account for retained receipts, including tracking funds received and expended, and had incorporated procedures designed to ensure the completion of specific work tasks before contractors were paid. Both the Forest Service and BLM issued guidance in January 2004 containing such controls for future projects.

The Forest Service initially provided minimal guidance on soliciting and incorporating public involvement in stewardship contracting projects and, as a result, the type and extent of efforts to involve communities varied considerably among the projects GAO reviewed. However, managers who did not incorporate public input may have missed valuable opportunities to strengthen their projects. For example, one project manager said that public involvement led to more stringent criteria for protecting water quality, and another reported that public involvement improved agency access to public lands needing fuel reduction. Although most managers GAO spoke with said they wanted additional guidance on public involvement, the Forest Service's recently issued stewardship contracting handbook does not contain specific guidance for obtaining community input—and BLM's recent guidance is similarly lacking. Without such guidance, each project manager must independently determine the type and extent of community involvement to solicit and then develop and implement community involvement procedures—an inefficient process that could lead to variation in community involvement across stewardship contracting projects in both agencies.

Forest Thinning and Prescribed Burning Undertaken Using Stewardship Contracting Authority



Source: Forest Service.