Why GAO Did This Study

Since 2001, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has been working to develop a modern Electronic Records Archives (ERA) system, a major information system that is intended to preserve and provide access to massive volumes of all types and formats of electronic records. The system is being developed incrementally over several years; the first system increment is to provide an initial set of functions, with additional capabilities to be added in future increments. However, in 2007, NARA's contractor acknowledged that it would not be able to meet the planned date for the initial operational capability of the first ERA increment.

GAO was asked to provide information on the steps that NARA has taken to respond to the delays encountered in the development. To prepare this testimony, GAO reviewed its previous work in this area, as well as the preliminary results of an ongoing performance audit. For this ongoing audit, GAO analyzed NARA reports, contract documents, and other material related to the ERA development project, and interviewed agency and contractor officials.

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Challenges in Implementing an Electronic Records Archive

What GAO Found

NARA is working to overcome the ERA schedule delays that occurred in 2007 by changing to a two-pronged development strategy, but uncertainties remain. First, NARA developed plans to achieve an initial operational capability for the ERA system in June 2008 with somewhat reduced capabilities from those that had been planned. For this initial system, known as the "base" system, software development deadlines have been met, and testing began on schedule. However, NARA has extended some test periods beyond what was originally planned, leaving less time at the end of the schedule for completing final activities. Although officials remain confident that the schedule changes will not affect the date of the initial operational capability, problems uncovered through testing could lead to its delay. Archives officials said they are mitigating the risk of delays by closely monitoring the testing process.

Second, the development delays of 2007 put at risk NARA's plan to use ERA to receive the presidential records of the Bush Administration in January 2009. In response to this risk, NARA and its contractor are pursuing a parallel development of a separate part of the system that is to be dedicated initially to the Bush records; this part of ERA—referred to as the "EOP (Executive Office of the President) system"—uses a different architecture from that of the base system: it is being built on a commercial product that can provide basic requirements for processing presidential electronic records, such as rapid ingest of records and ability to search content. Pursuing this as a separate development decouples the EOP system from dependence on the base system. However, completing the EOP system in time for the presidential transition remains uncertain, primarily because NARA and its contractor are still negotiating the precise scope of work and system requirements. These negotiations are challenging because, among other things, NARA does not know the exact nature of the presidential records that it is to receive in 2009. Although NARA and Bush Administration officials have held meetings on this topic, according to NARA officials, the Administration has not yet provided specific information on the volume and types of data to be transferred. System development is nonetheless proceeding based on NARA's volume estimates and the information available so far. According to NARA, developing the EOP system in time for the presidential transition is critical so that it can respond in a timely fashion to the information requirements of the Congress, the former and incumbent Presidents, and the courts.

Challenges remain for the ERA program in both the near and long term. In the near term, NARA has to finish testing the base system, define the scope and requirements of the EOP system, and complete its development. In the long term, it plans to merge the two architectures of these systems into an integrated whole. Meeting these challenges will be important to achieving NARA's ultimate aims for the ERA system: preserving and providing access to all types and formats of electronic records.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**