



Highlights of [GAO-07-1168](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Recognizing that millions of acres are at risk from wildland fire, the federal government expends substantial resources on thinning brush, trees, and other potentially hazardous fuels to reduce the fire risk to communities and the environment. However, questions have been raised about how the agencies responsible for wildland fire management—the Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service and the Department of the Interior’s (Interior) Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and National Park Service (NPS)—allocate their fuel reduction budgets and select projects.

GAO was asked to report on the agencies’ processes for allocating funds and selecting projects, and on how, if at all, these processes could be improved to better ensure that they contribute to the agencies’ overall goal of reducing risk. To obtain this information, GAO visited headquarters and field offices of all five agencies; obtained data on fuel reduction funding and accomplishments; and reviewed previous evaluations of the fuel reduction program.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending a number of actions to improve the agencies’ ability to ensure that fuel reduction funds are directed where they will most effectively reduce risk from wildland fire. In commenting on a draft of this report, the Forest Service and Interior agreed with its findings and recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-07-1168](#). For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or [nazzaror@gao.gov](mailto:nazzaror@gao.gov).

## WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

### Better Information and a Systematic Process Could Improve Agencies’ Approach to Allocating Fuel Reduction Funds and Selecting Projects

#### What GAO Found

In allocating fuel reduction funds and selecting projects, the Forest Service, Interior, and the four Interior agencies use both quantitative processes (such as computer models or scoring systems) and professional judgment. At the national level, the Forest Service uses a computer model to help determine the amount of each regional office’s allocation, although the model is being refined and the agency still relies largely on past funding levels. Interior and BLM are also developing computer models—based in part on the Forest Service’s—to help allocate funds; of Interior’s other agencies, BIA allocates funds based on past regional performance in reducing fuels, FWS uses a computer model, and NPS relies on historical funding levels that were based on a now-discontinued model. At the regional and local levels, the agencies use a variety of quantitative and judgmental processes.

Although the Forest Service and Interior are taking steps to enhance their funding allocation and project selection processes, there are several improvements they could make to better ensure that they allocate fuel reduction funds to effectively reduce risk. Specifically, when allocating funds and selecting projects, the agencies could improve their processes by

- consistently assessing all elements of wildland fire risk—including hazard, risk, and values—at the national, regional, and local levels, in order to identify those lands at highest risk from wildland fire and incorporate this information in the allocation and project selection process;
- developing and using measures of the effectiveness of fuel reduction treatments in order to estimate how much risk reduction is likely to be achieved through particular treatments and for how long;
- using this information on effectiveness, once developed, in combination with existing information on treatment costs, to assess and compare the cost-effectiveness of potential treatments in deciding how to optimally allocate funds;
- clarifying the relative importance of the numerous factors they use in allocating funds, including those factors (such as funding stability and the use of forest products resulting from fuel reduction activities) that are unrelated to risk, treatment effectiveness, or cost effectiveness; and
- following a more systematic process in allocating funds—that is, a process that is methodical, based on criteria, and applied consistently—to ensure that funds are directed to locations where risk can be reduced most effectively.