



Highlights of [GAO-06-669](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) most recent data indicate that 95 percent of all Americans face an increased likelihood of developing cancer as a result of breathing air toxics—pollutants such as benzene and asbestos that may cause cancer or other serious health problems. Sources of air toxics include large industrial facilities, smaller facilities such as dry cleaners, and cars and trucks. The 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments required EPA to regulate 190 pollutants from these sources through a multifaceted regulatory program. While EPA issues federal standards, state and local agencies generally administer these standards, and some develop their own rules to complement the federal standards. In this context, GAO was asked to assess (1) EPA's progress and challenges in implementing the air toxics program, (2) available information on the program's costs and benefits, and (3) practices of state and local air toxics programs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that EPA develop a plan for improving the management of its air toxics program, including a prioritization scheme, timelines, and estimates of resources needed to meet its statutory obligations. EPA agreed, in part, with our conclusions and recommendations, and provided clarifications on three statements in the report.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-669.

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

CLEAN AIR ACT

EPA Should Improve the Management of Its Air Toxics Program

What GAO Found

While EPA has made some progress in implementing its air toxics program mandated by the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments, most of its regulatory actions were completed late and major aspects of the program have still not been addressed. Most of EPA's progress relates to issuing emissions standards for large stationary sources, although EPA completed these standards about 4 years behind schedule. However, many of the unmet requirements pertain to limiting emissions from small stationary and mobile sources, which collectively account for most emissions of air toxics. The agency faces continuing implementation challenges stemming from the program's low priority relative to other programs and related funding constraints. To this end, the agency lacks a comprehensive strategy for completing the unmet requirements or estimates of resources necessary to do so. Senior EPA officials said the program's agenda is largely set by external stakeholders who file litigation when the agency misses deadlines. As a result of EPA's limited progress, the agency has not addressed health risks from air toxics to the extent or in the time frames envisioned in the Clean Air Act. Senior EPA officials said that issuing standards for large stationary sources had addressed the greatest risks from air toxics and that other clean air programs also control air toxics as a side benefit. However, EPA does not have reliable data on the degree of risk reduction achieved through its regulations. Furthermore, the data that are available suggest that the agency has substantial opportunities to reduce emissions from mobile and small stationary sources.

Available information on EPA's efforts to control air toxics is not sufficiently comprehensive to measure the program's total costs and benefits. Specifically, EPA has not comprehensively estimated the national economic costs of all air toxics standards and lacks the data necessary to assess the benefits of these standards, such as decreased incidence of cancer. Information on these impacts would help the agency assess the overall net benefits (total benefits minus total costs) of the air toxics program and compare these effects with those generated by higher-priority clean air programs, such as those intended to address smog. Data on other indicators of the program's effectiveness, such as changes in emissions, concentrations of air toxics in the (ambient) outdoor air, and data on compliance with air toxics standards are also limited and inconclusive.

The state and local programs we reviewed use practices that could potentially help EPA enhance the effectiveness of its air toxics program. For example, several state programs have systematic approaches for identifying and prioritizing new pollutants that could inform EPA's efforts to meet the act's requirement to review and update the list of regulated pollutants.