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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-03-517](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

The 95-million acre National Wildlife Refuge System contains federal lands devoted to the conservation and management of fish, wildlife, and plant resources. While the federal government owns the surface lands in the system, in many cases private parties own the subsurface mineral rights and have the legal authority to explore for and extract oil and gas. GAO was asked to determine the extent of oil and gas activity on refuges, identify the environmental effects, and assess the Fish and Wildlife Service's management and oversight of oil and gas activities.

## What GAO Recommends

In a draft of this report, GAO made several recommendations to enhance the Fish and Wildlife Service's management of oil and gas activities, including collecting better data; improving training, oversight, and land acquisition practices; and strengthening permitting authority. GAO also recommended that the Service seek additional authority to regulate private mineral rights.

In response to comments received from the Department of the Interior, GAO has clarified its position as to the means that the Service could use to improve oversight. Also, in light of Interior's comments indicating a perceived inability to request additional authority, GAO is asking Congress to consider expanding the Service's authority to regulate private mineral rights.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-517](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-517).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact William R. Swick at (206) 287-4851 or [swickw@gao.gov](mailto:swickw@gao.gov).

# NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES

## Opportunities to Improve the Management and Oversight of Oil and Gas Activities on Federal Lands

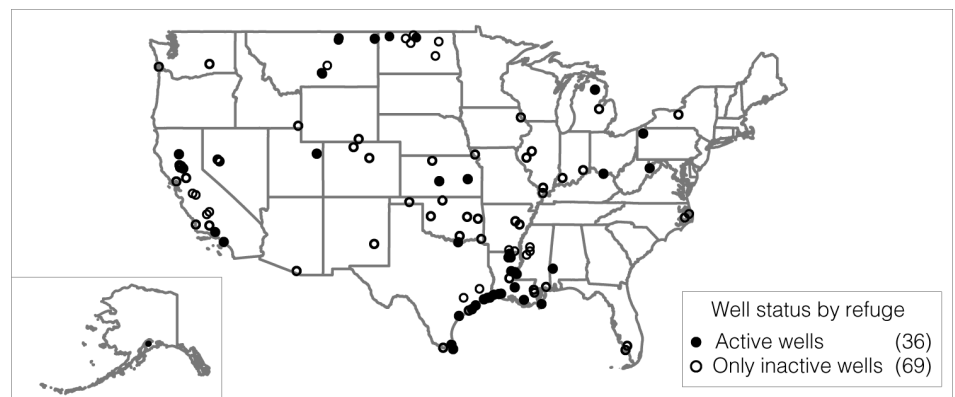
### What GAO Found

About one-quarter (155 of 575) of all refuges have past or present oil and gas activity, some dating to at least the 1920s. Activities range from exploration to drilling and production to pipelines transiting refuge lands. One hundred five refuges contain a total of 4,406 oil and gas wells—2,600 inactive wells and 1,806 active wells. The 1,806 wells, located at 36 refuges and many around the Gulf Coast (see figure), produced oil and gas valued at \$880 million during the last 12 month reporting period, roughly 1 percent of domestic production. Thirty-five refuges contain only pipelines.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has not assessed the cumulative environmental effects of oil and gas activities on refuges. Available studies, anecdotal information, and GAO's observations show that the environmental effects of oil and gas activities vary from negligible, such as from buried pipelines, to substantial, such as from large oil spills or from large-scale infrastructure. These effects also vary from the temporary to the longer term. Some of the most detrimental effects of oil and gas activities have been reduced through environmental laws and improved practices and technology. Moreover, oil and gas operators have taken steps, in some cases voluntarily, to reverse damages resulting from oil and gas activities.

Federal management and oversight of oil and gas activities varies widely among refuges—some refuges take extensive measures, while others exercise little control or enforcement. GAO found that this variation occurs because of differences in authority to oversee private mineral rights and because refuge managers lack enough guidance, resources, and training to properly manage and oversee oil and gas activities. Greater attention to oil and gas activities by the Fish and Wildlife Service would increase its understanding of associated environmental effects and contribute to more consistent use of practices and technologies that protect refuge resources.

**National Wildlife Refuges with Oil and Gas Wells**



Source: Premier Data Services (data) and GAO (analysis).