

GAO  
Accountability · Integrity · Reliability

# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-05-732T](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Water, Committee on Environment and Public Works, United States Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

The purpose of the Endangered Species Act is to conserve endangered and threatened species and the ecosystems upon which they depend. This law currently protects more than 1,260 animal and plant species. Within the Department of the Interior, the Fish and Wildlife Service implements and enforces the act. In addition, all federal agencies, such as the Department of Defense and the Bureau of Land Management, must ensure that their activities do not jeopardize a protected species' continued existence or adversely modify or destroy habitat that has been designated as critical to its survival.

The Endangered Species Act and its implementation can be controversial when there are conflicting uses for a natural resource as, for example, when timber on federal lands is both habitat for endangered and threatened species and a valuable commodity to be harvested. Conflicts also occur over the adequacy or interpretation of scientific information in making species protection decisions.

GAO has issued numerous reports on the implementation of the Endangered Species Act. This testimony is based primarily on four of these reports and addresses (1) collaboration among federal agencies to conserve threatened and endangered species and (2) utilization of scientific information by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-732T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-732T).

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

## ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

### Successes and Challenges in Agency Collaboration and the Use of Scientific Information in the Decision Making Process

#### What GAO Found

We have found that effective agency collaboration can reduce conflict over competing uses of natural resources and improve agencies' abilities to protect species while carrying out other mission-related activities. While we have noted several instances of effective interagency cooperation, we have also discovered that agencies could be doing more to work together to find effective species protections. For example, at one military facility, Air Force officials worked with the Fish and Wildlife Service and others to entice the endangered Sonoran pronghorn—a species similar in appearance to antelope—away from military training areas. As a result, the agencies were able to minimize the impact of species protections on training exercises. Previously, Air Force officials had reported that 32 percent of their live-fire missions were either cancelled or moved due to the presence of the pronghorn. However, we have found that there are obstacles to further agency collaboration that need to be addressed.

We have found that the Fish and Wildlife Service generally used the best available information in key endangered species decisions, although the agency was not always integrating new research into ongoing species management decisions. For example, since the Bureau of Land Management eliminated sheep grazing on more than 800,000 acres in tortoise habitat in California, neither the Bureau or the Fish and Wildlife Service had ensured that necessary research was conducted to assess whether this action had benefited the tortoise. Unless managers link research findings to recovery actions, they cannot develop a scientific basis to make decisions about whether land use restrictions—such as limiting grazing or other activities in tortoise habitat—should remain unchanged, be strengthened, or whether alternative actions are more appropriate. Developing such information is important as some of the restrictions imposed to protect the tortoise have been controversial because of their broad impact and some affected by the restrictions have questioned whether they are necessary for the tortoise's recovery.

#### Agencies Must Balance the Use of Natural Resources with the Protection of Species



Sources: GAO, Nova Development Corporation, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.