



Highlights of [GAO-09-223](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Growing ecological challenges ranging from wildland fires to climate change have revived interest in moving the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Forest Service into the Department of the Interior (Interior). The Forest Service manages almost a quarter of the nation's lands but is the only major land management agency outside Interior.

GAO was asked to report on the potential effects of moving the Forest Service into Interior and creating a new bureau equal to Interior's other bureaus, such as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). GAO was also asked to identify factors that should be considered if such a move were legislated and management practices that could facilitate a move. GAO analyzed five historical proposals to reorganize federal land management agencies; interviewed USDA, Interior, and other officials and outside experts; and studied joint Forest Service–BLM programs to assess efforts to integrate the agencies' work.

What GAO Recommends

This report contains no recommendations, but provides decision makers with details on the potential effects of moving the Forest Service into Interior and factors that policymakers should consider in such a move. Generally, the Forest Service and Interior agreed with the report, but Interior observed that a move would not necessarily diminish the Forest Service's state and private role.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-223](#). For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

FEDERAL LAND MANAGEMENT

Observations on a Possible Move of the Forest Service into the Department of the Interior

What GAO Found

Moving the Forest Service into Interior could potentially improve federal land management by consolidating into one department key agencies with land management missions and increasing the effectiveness of their programs. At the same time, a move would provide few efficiencies in the short term and could diminish the role the Forest Service plays in state and private land management, a mission the agency has in common with USDA but not with Interior. According to many agency officials and experts, where the Forest Service mission is aligned with Interior's—in particular, the multiple-use mission comparable to BLM's—a move could increase the overall effectiveness of some of the agencies' programs and policies. For example, according to some officials, a move could help harmonize the Forest Service's and BLM's oil and gas, grazing, and other programs and potentially make the agencies' appeals processes similar. Conversely, most agency officials and experts GAO interviewed believed that few short-term efficiencies would be realized from a move, although a number said opportunities would be created for potential long-term efficiencies, such as consolidating information technology systems. Many officials and experts suggested that if the objective of a move is to improve land management and increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the agencies' diverse programs, other options might achieve better results. For example, numerous officials and experts suggested leaving the Forest Service in USDA and increasing collaboration among the land management agencies.

If the Forest Service were moved into Interior, Interior and USDA would need to consider a number of cultural, organizational, and legal factors and related transition costs, some of which could be managed by certain practices successfully used in the past to merge and transform organizations. The agencies' long histories and traditions have created distinctive cultures, which officials and experts predicted could clash under Interior, leading to reduced morale and productivity. Changes needed to departmental and agency organization in the event of a move could also present challenges. For example, officials and experts said that integrating the Forest Service's reporting, budgeting, and personnel processes and systems into Interior's could be time-consuming, disruptive, and costly. Further, complex legal issues, such as differing statutory authorities, may need reconciliation. GAO's previous work on merging and transforming organizations, however, identified some key practices that Interior and USDA could use to facilitate a move and manage the costs; several of the practices were also mentioned by a number of officials and experts GAO interviewed. For example, identifying goals for a move, up front, would enable planning to achieve those goals, and creating an effective communication strategy would help agency employees understand the reason for a move. Organizational transformations are inevitably complex, involving many factors and often creating unintended consequences. In considering a move of the Forest Service into Interior, policymakers will need to carefully weigh mission and management gains against potential short-term disruption and operational costs.