



Highlights of [GAO-09-444T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Our nation's wildland fire problems have worsened in the past decade. The Forest Service within the Department of Agriculture and four agencies within the Department of the Interior (Interior) are responsible for managing fires on federal lands. Federal appropriations to these agencies for wildland fire management have more than doubled since the late 1990s, averaging \$2.9 billion annually in recent years. Rising wildland fire costs have challenged the agencies to meet their land management responsibilities. This testimony, based on previous GAO reports, discusses (1) the budgetary and programmatic effects of the increasing cost of fire management activities and (2) steps the agencies could take to help contain wildland fire expenditures and steps they could take, and Congress could consider, to reduce the need to transfer funds from other programs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO previously recommended that the Forest Service and Interior take several steps to help contain the rising costs of managing wildland fires and address the problems associated with transferring funds to fight fires. Although the agencies have made some progress, they have been slow to implement several key recommendations. GAO also previously identified alternative funding approaches Congress could consider, which could reduce the need to transfer funds from nonfire accounts.

View [GAO-09-444T](#) or key components. For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

Actions by Federal Agencies and Congress Could Mitigate Rising Fire Costs and Their Effects on Other Agency Programs

What GAO Found

The sharply rising costs of managing wildland fires have led the Forest Service and Interior agencies to transfer funds from other programs to help pay for fire suppression and, according to agency officials and others, may also be reducing the total funds available to agency programs unrelated to fire. GAO reported in 2004 that from fiscal years 1999 through 2003, the Forest Service and Interior transferred over \$2.7 billion from nonfire programs to help fund fire suppression. Although agencies received additional appropriations to cover about 80 percent of the transferred funds, GAO found that the transfers led to canceled and delayed projects and strained relationships with nonfederal partners. Moreover, some of the canceled or delayed projects, such as constructing new facilities, were intended to improve the agencies' capabilities to fight fires. Since 2004, funding transfers have continued, with the agencies' transferring funds in fiscal years 2006, 2007, and 2008. Furthermore, federal and state officials have expressed concern that rising fire management costs are reducing the total funds available to the agencies' nonfire programs.

As GAO has reported, there are several steps the agencies could take, and actions Congress could consider, that could mitigate the rising costs of wildland fire management and its effect on the agencies' other programs.

- Although the agencies have, among other actions, improved decision-support tools for helping officials select appropriate strategies for fighting individual wildland fires, the agencies continue to lack both an agencywide strategy for containing fire suppression costs and a broader long-term wildland fire management strategy that identifies options, along with associated funding, for reducing excess vegetation and responding to fires—what GAO has termed a cohesive strategy.
- The agencies could develop a better method of estimating the suppression funds requested, as GAO recommended in 2004. Better estimates in a given year could reduce the likelihood that the agencies would need to transfer funds from other accounts, yet the agencies continue to use an estimation method with known problems. The Forest Service told GAO it analyzed alternative methods for estimating needed suppression funds but determined that no better method was available. Because the agencies had to transfer funds in each of the last 3 years, however, a more accurate method for estimating suppression costs may still be needed.
- In addition, Congress may wish to consider establishing a reserve account to fund emergency wildland firefighting, which could reduce the need for the agencies to transfer funds. The advantages and disadvantages of several alternative funding approaches were discussed in GAO's 2004 report. Congress considered at least two bills in 2008 proposing establishment of a reserve account, but neither bill passed. One of those bills was reintroduced in March 2009.