



Highlights of [GAO-09-443T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Forest Service, within the Department of Agriculture, manages over 190 million acres of forest and grassland. The agency is responsible for managing its lands for various purposes—including recreation, grazing, timber harvesting, and others—while ensuring that such activities do not impair the lands' long-term productivity. Carrying out these often competing responsibilities has been made more difficult by the increasing cost of wildland fires and the budgetary constraints necessitated by our nation's long-term fiscal outlook.

This testimony highlights some of the major management challenges the Forest Service faces in carrying out its land management responsibilities. It is based on numerous reports GAO has issued on a wide variety of the agency's activities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made a number of recommendations intended to improve the Forest Service's wildland fire management, strengthen its collection of data, and increase accountability. The Forest Service has taken steps to implement many of these recommendations—by, for example, improving its processes for allocating funds to reduce potentially hazardous vegetation, and issuing guidance to strengthen financial controls—but has been slow to take action on others.

View [GAO-09-443T](#) or key components. For more information, contact Robin Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

FOREST SERVICE

Emerging Issues Highlight the Need to Address Persistent Management Challenges

What GAO Found

While the Forest Service has made improvements in many areas GAO has reported on in recent years, certain management challenges persist—with the agency struggling to manage a worsening wildland fire problem and spiraling fire costs, collect data on its activities and their costs, and demonstrate financial and performance accountability to Congress and the public. Several emerging issues facing the agency underscore the urgency of addressing these challenges.

The Forest Service continues to lack strategies for using its wildland fire management funds effectively. In numerous reports over the past decade, GAO has highlighted the challenges the Forest Service faces in protecting the nation against the threat of wildland fires. While the agency has taken important steps to improve its wildland fire management, other key steps remain. Specifically, the agency needs to (1) develop a cohesive strategy laying out various potential long-term approaches for addressing wildland fire, the estimated costs associated with each approach, and the trade-offs involved; (2) establish clear goals and a strategy to help contain increasing wildland fire costs; (3) continue improving its processes for allocating funds and selecting projects to reduce potentially hazardous vegetation; and (4) take steps to improve its use of a new interagency budgeting and planning tool.

Program management suffers from lack of data on activities and costs. GAO's work over the years points to a persistent shortcoming in the Forest Service's management of its activities: the lack of adequate data on program activities and costs. This shortcoming spans multiple land management programs, including programs for selling timber and rehabilitating and reforesting lands that have been burned, as well as administrative functions such as the competitive sourcing program, which aims to increase competition between federal entities and private sector organizations. Inadequate data have hindered field managers in carrying out their duties and prevented the agency from understanding how much its activities are costing.

Financial and performance accountability have been inadequate. The Forest Service has struggled to implement adequate internal controls over its funds, generate accurate financial information, and provide clear measures of what it accomplishes with the appropriations it receives every year. GAO's concerns about these issues date back to the 1990s but have yet to be fully addressed.

Several emerging issues underscore the need for the Forest Service to improve its management. The evolving effects of climate change, increasing development in and near wildlands, the aging of the federal workforce, and our nation's long-term fiscal condition likely will have profound implications for the agency and magnify the urgency of addressing these challenges.