



Highlights of [GAO-09-434](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) overarching mission is to protect human health and the environment by implementing and enforcing environmental laws intended to improve the quality of the nation's air and water and to protect its land. EPA's policies and programs affect virtually all segments of the economy, society, and government. As such, it operates in a highly complex and controversial regulatory arena. In recent years, GAO has identified several key challenges EPA faces and corrective actions that would enable the agency to more effectively accomplish its mission.

GAO was asked to identify challenges at EPA that hinder its ability to implement its programs effectively, based on prior GAO work. These challenges include (1) improving agencywide management, (2) transforming EPA's processes for assessing and controlling toxic chemicals, (3) improving implementation of the Clean Air Act, (4) reducing pollution in the nation's waters, (5) speeding the pace of cleanup at Superfund and other hazardous waste sites, and (6) addressing emerging climate change issues.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO has made a number of recommendations intended to improve EPA's programs by enhancing the information it uses to manage them and strengthening internal controls. EPA has concurred with most of the recommendations but has been slow to implement some of them.

View [GAO-09-434](#) or key components. For more information, contact John Stephenson at (202) 512-3841 or [stephensonj@gao.gov](mailto:stephensonj@gao.gov).

# ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

## Major Management Challenges

### What GAO Found

EPA faces the following challenges that hinder its ability to implement its programs effectively:

- **Improving agencywide management.** EPA has launched various initiatives to address crosscutting general management issues, including environmental enforcement and compliance, human capital management, and the development and use of environmental information. However, these initiatives have generally fallen considerably short of their intended results.
- **Transforming EPA's processes for assessing and controlling toxic chemicals.** EPA has failed to develop sufficient chemical assessment information to limit public exposure to many chemicals that may pose substantial health risks. In January 2009, GAO added a new issue—the need to transform EPA's process for assessing and controlling toxic chemicals—to its list of high-risk areas warranting increased attention by Congress and the executive branch.
- **Improving implementation of the Clean Air Act.** EPA faces many important challenges related to implementation of the Clean Air Act, including those highlighted by GAO regarding its coordination with other federal agencies, analyses of health impacts from air pollution, and delays in regulating mercury and other air toxics. EPA also faces challenges relating to numerous regulatory proposals that have been overturned or remanded by the courts.
- **Reducing pollution in the nation's waters.** EPA partners with federal, state, and local agencies and others to reduce pollution in the nation's waters. Among the most daunting water pollution control problems, the nation's water utilities face billions of dollars in upgrades to aging and deteriorating infrastructures that left unaddressed can affect the quality of our water. EPA will receive \$6 billion in additional water infrastructure funding from the recently passed stimulus bill.
- **Speeding the pace of cleanup at Superfund and other hazardous waste sites.** Congress passed the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, better known as Superfund, in 1980, giving the federal government the authority to ensure the cleanup of hazardous waste sites both on private and public lands. Nonetheless, several key management problems have not been resolved since that time. For example, citing competing priorities and lack of funds, EPA has not implemented a 1980 statutory mandate under Superfund to require businesses handling hazardous substances to provide financial assurances to pay for potential environmental cleanups.
- **Addressing emerging climate change issues.** In GAO's view, the federal government's approach to climate change has been ad hoc and is not well coordinated across government agencies. For example, the federal government lacks a comprehensive approach for targeting federal research dollars toward the development and deployment of low-carbon technologies.