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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-09-412T](#), a testimony to the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Forest Service, which manages almost a quarter of the nation's lands, is the only major land management agency outside the Department of the Interior (Interior). Four federal land management agencies—the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service in Interior—manage most of the 680 million acres of federal land across the country. Growing ecological challenges, ranging from wildland fires to climate change, have revived interest in moving the Forest Service into 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 BLM. GAO was also asked to identify factors that should be considered if such a move were legislated, as well as management practices that could facilitate a move. This testimony is based on GAO's report, *Federal Land Management: Observations on a Possible Move of the Forest Service into the Department of the Interior* ([GAO-09-223](#)), released today.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-412T](#). For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

FEDERAL LAND MANAGEMENT

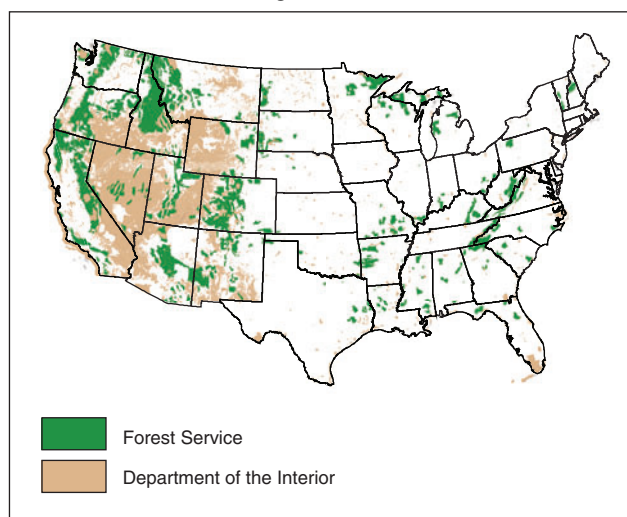
Potential Effects and Factors to Consider in a Move of the Forest Service into the Department of the Interior

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. 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. 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. 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.

If the Forest Service were moved into Interior, USDA and Interior 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. For example, integrating the Forest Service's reporting, budgeting, and human capital processes and systems into Interior's could be time-consuming, costly, and disruptive. Nevertheless, Interior and USDA could implement some key merger and transformation practices to help manage any resulting disruptions and other transition costs. 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.

Federal Lands in the Contiguous United States



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Geological Survey's National Atlas Web site data.