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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-06-670](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, Committee on Resources, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Since 2001, Congress and federal agencies, including the Forest Service and Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM), have recognized the importance of rehabilitating and restoring lands unlikely to recover on their own after wildland fires. However, while funding has increased for fire prevention, suppression, and first-year emergency stabilization, it has decreased for rehabilitation (work up to 3 years after fires) and restoration (work beyond the first 3 years). GAO was asked (1) how the Forest Service and BLM plan postfire rehabilitation and restoration projects, (2) how much needed rehabilitation and restoration work they have completed for recent wildland fires, and (3) what challenges the agencies face in addressing their needs.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that the Forest Service and BLM improve their information on whether postfire rehabilitation and restoration needs are met, and that the Forest Service augment research to help guide decisions. In commenting on a draft of this report, the Forest Service and Interior generally agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-670](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-670).

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

# WILDLAND FIRE REHABILITATION AND RESTORATION

## Forest Service and BLM Could Benefit from Improved Information on Status of Needed Work

### What GAO Found

The Forest Service and BLM use similar procedures to identify rehabilitation and restoration needs, but differ in how they plan and fund related projects. Given the variety of ecosystems they manage, Forest Service field staff have the discretion to locally prioritize projects, and the agency addresses them through various programs with appropriations from multiple accounts. In contrast, BLM has a standard process for planning needed rehabilitation projects and, through a single account, funds projects for up to 3 years after fires. For restoration projects—that is, work needed beyond 3 years after a fire—BLM requires them to be addressed through other programs such as rangeland management.

With available information, it is not possible to reliably determine how much needed rehabilitation and restoration work has been completed for recent Forest Service and BLM fires. The Forest Service does not know how much work has been completed because it does not collect nationwide data. BLM reported that, according to its data, it has completed most of its rehabilitation work, but the agency does not collect data on postfire restoration work, which is done through other programs. GAO surveyed Forest Service and BLM officials to determine how much needed work has been completed, but the information provided in the survey was not sufficiently reliable to report.

Forest Service and BLM officials face different challenges to addressing their rehabilitation and restoration needs. Forest Service officials cited factors such as competing priorities within constrained budgets and controversy over certain activities. Agency officials said that controversy over harvesting burned timber can be exacerbated by the limited scientific research available to guide such decisions. BLM officials cited challenges to achieving long-term success when seeding burned areas. The agency is taking several steps to improve success rates.

Forest Service Building Partly Buried by Postfire Flood Debris (left) and Restored Later



Source: Forest Service.