



Highlights of [GAO-07-655](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Annual appropriations to prepare for and respond to wildland fires have increased substantially over the past decade, in recent years totaling about \$3 billion. The Forest Service within the Department of Agriculture and four agencies within the Department of the Interior (Interior) are responsible for responding to wildland fires on federal lands. GAO determined what steps federal agencies have taken, in response to findings from previous studies, to (1) address key operational areas that could help contain the costs of preparing for and responding to wildland fires and (2) improve their management of their cost-containment efforts. To address these objectives, GAO reviewed previous cost-containment studies and other agency documents and interviewed agency officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior take several steps to improve their management of cost-containment efforts, including establishing clearly defined goals and measurable objectives and a strategy to achieve them, and provide this information to Congress in preparation for the 2008 fire season. The Forest Service and Interior generally disagreed with GAO's findings, stating that GAO did not accurately portray some of the agencies' actions to contain costs. They neither agreed nor disagreed with GAO's recommendations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-655](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-655).

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 MANAGEMENT

## Lack of Clear Goals or a Strategy Hinders Federal Agencies' Efforts to Contain the Costs of Fighting Fires

### What GAO Found

The Forest Service and Interior agencies have initiated a number of steps to address key operational areas previously identified as needing improvement to help federal agencies contain wildland fire costs, but the effects on containing costs are unknown, in part because many of these steps are not yet complete. First, federal firefighting agencies are developing a system to help them better identify and set priorities for lands needing treatment to reduce fuels, but they have yet to decide how they will keep data in the system current. Second, federal agencies have taken some steps to improve how they acquire and use personnel, equipment, and other firefighting assets—such as implementing a computerized system to more efficiently dispatch and track available firefighting assets—but have not yet completed the more fundamental step of determining the appropriate type and quantity of firefighting assets needed for the fire season. Third, the agencies have clarified certain policies and are improving analytical tools that assist officials in identifying and implementing an appropriate response to a given fire, but several other policies limit the agencies' use of less aggressive firefighting strategies, which typically cost less. Fourth, federal agencies, working with nonfederal entities, have recently taken steps to clarify guidance to better ensure that firefighting costs are shared consistently for fires that threaten both federal and nonfederal lands and resources, but it is unclear how the agencies will ensure that this guidance is followed.

The agencies have also taken steps to address previously identified weaknesses in their management of cost-containment efforts, but they have neither clearly defined their cost-containment goals and objectives nor developed a strategy for achieving them—steps that are fundamental to sound program management. Although the agencies have established a broad goal of suppressing wildland fires at minimum cost—considering firefighter and public safety and resources and structures to be protected—they have no defined criteria by which to weigh the relative importance of these often-competing priorities. As a result, according to agency officials and reports, officials in the field lack a clear understanding of the relative importance the agencies' leadership places on containing costs and therefore are likely to select firefighting strategies without due consideration of the costs of suppression. The agencies also have yet to develop a vision of how the various cost-containment steps they are taking relate to one another or to determine the extent to which these steps will be effective. The agencies are working to develop a better cost-containment performance measure, but the measure may take a number of years to fully refine. Finally, the agencies have taken, or are beginning to take, steps to improve their oversight and increase accountability—such as requiring agency officials to evaluate firefighting teams according to how well they contained costs—although the extent to which these steps will assist the agencies in containing costs is unknown.