



Highlights of [GAO-07-427T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

Over the past two decades, the number of acres burned by wildland fires has increased, often threatening human lives, property, and ecosystems. The cost of responding to wildland fires has also grown, especially as more homes are built in or near wildlands, an area called the wildland-urban interface. Past management practices, including a concerted federal policy in the 20th century of suppressing fires to protect communities and ecosystems, unintentionally resulted in steady accumulation of dense vegetation that can fuel large, intense, and often costly wildland fires.

GAO was asked to identify actions that federal wildland fire agencies need to take to help contain federal wildland fire expenditures. GAO has identified these actions in three of its reports addressing fuel reduction and cost-sharing efforts and as part of an ongoing review of federal agencies' efforts to contain wildland fire preparedness and suppression costs for this committee. Specifically, GAO focused on examining agencies' efforts to (1) reduce accumulated fuels and address wildland fire problems, (2) share with nonfederal entities the costs of responding to multijurisdictional fires, and (3) contain the costs of preparing for and responding to wildland fires.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-427T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-427T).

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 a Cohesive Strategy Hinders Agencies' Cost-Containment Efforts

#### What GAO Found

Over the past 7 years, GAO has recommended a number of actions federal wildland fire agencies should take to improve their management of wildland fire activities, actions that could also help contain the rising federal expenditures for responding to wildland fires. These agencies—the Forest Service within the Department of Agriculture and land management agencies within the Department of the Interior—concurred with GAO's recommendations but have not completed, or in some cases have not yet begun, needed actions. GAO's ongoing review of federal agencies' efforts to contain wildland fire preparedness and suppression costs has also identified other actions that may be needed. Specifically, the agencies need to:

- ***Develop a cohesive strategy that identifies the options and associated funding to reduce fuels and address wildland fire problems.*** In 1999, to address the problem of excess fuels and their potential to increase the severity of wildland fires and the cost of suppression efforts, GAO recommended that a cohesive strategy be developed that identified the available long-term options and associated funding for reducing these fuels. In 2005 and 2006, because the agencies had not yet developed one, GAO reiterated the need for such a strategy but broadened its focus to better address the interrelated nature of fuel reduction efforts and wildland fire response. GAO also recommended that, as an interim step, the agencies develop a tactical plan outlining the steps and time frames needed for completing a cohesive strategy. As of January 2007, the agencies had not developed either a cohesive strategy or a tactical plan.
- ***Clarify their guidance for sharing wildland fire suppression costs with nonfederal entities.*** In 2006, to address the rising costs of responding to fires that threaten both federal and nonfederal lands and resources, GAO recommended that the federal agencies provide more specific guidance as to when particular cost-sharing methods should be used. The cost-sharing method used can have significant financial consequences for the entities involved—potentially amounting to millions of dollars. As of January 2007, the agencies were updating their guidance on possible cost-sharing methods and when each typically would be used, but it is unclear how the agencies will ensure that the guidance is followed.
- ***Establish clear goals, strategies, and performance measures to help contain wildland fire costs.*** Preliminary findings from GAO's ongoing work indicate that the effectiveness of agencies' efforts to contain costs may be limited because the agencies have not clearly defined their cost-containment goals, developed a strategy for achieving those goals, or developed related performance measures. For these efforts to be effective, the agencies need to integrate cost-containment goals with the other goals of the wildland fire program—such as protecting life and property—and to recognize that trade-offs will be needed to meet desired goals within the context of fiscal constraints.