



Highlights of [GAO-08-433T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The nation's wildland fire problems have worsened over the past decade. Recent years have seen dramatic increases in the number of acres burned and the dollars spent on preparing for and responding to wildland fires. As GAO has previously reported, a number of factors have contributed to worsening fire seasons and increased firefighting expenditures, including an accumulation of fuels due to past land management practices; drought and other stresses, in part related to climate change; and an increase in human development in or near wildlands.

Recent GAO reports have identified shortcomings in the approach to wildland fire management taken by the responsible federal agencies—the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service and four agencies within the Department of the Interior. GAO was asked to testify on agency efforts to (1) develop a cohesive strategy for preparing for and responding to wildland fire, (2) contain federal expenditures related to wildland fire, and (3) improve the processes used to allocate funds for reducing accumulated fuels and to select fuel reduction projects. GAO also is providing preliminary findings from its ongoing review of an interagency budget allocation and planning model known as fire program analysis (FPA). This testimony is based on issued GAO reports, reviews of agency documents related to the development of FPA, and discussions with agency officials.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-433T](#). For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or [nazzaror@gao.gov](mailto:nazzaror@gao.gov).

## WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

### Federal Agencies Lack Key Long- and Short-Term Management Strategies for Using Program Funds Effectively

#### What GAO Found

In recent years, GAO has recommended a number of actions federal wildland fire agencies should take to better diagnose the extent of the nation's wildland fire problems and develop a strategic approach for addressing them. The agencies have taken some steps to respond to GAO's recommendations, but have not completed other needed steps. Specifically, the agencies should

- **recommit to developing a cohesive strategy that identifies options and associated funding to reduce fuels and address wildland fire problems.** In several reports dating to 1999, GAO recommended that a cohesive strategy be developed that identifies the available long-term options and associated funding for reducing hazardous fuels and for responding to wildland fires. Such a strategy would assist Congress and the agencies in making informed decisions about effective and affordable long-term approaches to addressing the nation's wildland fire problems. As of January 2008, the agencies had not developed such a strategy and, in fact, had retreated from earlier commitments to do so.
- **establish clear goals and a strategy to help contain wildland fire costs.** In 2007, GAO reported that the agencies had taken several steps to contain wildland fire costs, including developing new decision support tools to help officials select the most appropriate strategy for fighting wildland fires, but lacked clearly defined cost-containment goals and a strategy for achieving them. As a result, we believe managers in the field lacked a clear understanding of the relative importance agency leadership placed on containing costs and were therefore likely to select firefighting strategies without duly considering the costs of suppression. Although the agencies have continued to implement individual cost-containment steps, they still have not developed clear goals or a strategy for achieving them.
- **continue to improve their processes for allocating fuel reduction funds and selecting fuel reduction projects.** Also in 2007, GAO recommended several improvements to the agencies' processes for allocating fuel reduction funds to field units and selecting projects. Specifically, GAO recommended that the agencies use a more systematic allocation process, improve the information they use to make allocation decisions, and clarify the relative importance of the various factors they consider when allocating funds. The agencies are currently taking steps to implement these improvements, although none have yet been completed.

In addition, GAO's ongoing review of FPA suggests that the current model, which the agencies expect to complete in June 2008, may not allow the agencies to meet all of the key goals established for FPA. Specifically, preliminary results from GAO's review suggest that the model will not allow the agencies to analyze long-term trade-offs between annual fuel reduction treatments and future expected suppression costs for large fires. GAO intends to conduct a full assessment of FPA once it is completed.