

**GAO**  
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**Highlights**

Highlights of [GAO-03-529T](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Environment and Hazardous Materials, House Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Why GAO Did This Study**

Nationwide, underground storage tanks (UST) containing petroleum and other hazardous substances are leaking, thereby contaminating the soil and water, and posing health risks. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which implements the UST program with the states, required tank owners to install leak detection and prevention equipment by the end of 1993 and 1998 respectively. The Congress asked GAO to determine to what extent (1) tanks comply with the requirements, (2) EPA and the states are inspecting tanks and enforcing requirements, (3) upgraded tanks still leak, and (4) EPA and states are cleaning up these leaks. In response, GAO conducted a survey of all states in 2000 and issued a report on its findings in May 2001. This testimony is based on that report, as well as updated information on program performance since that time.

**What GAO Recommends**

To address the problem of leaking tanks, GAO suggests that the Congress consider:

- Providing states more funds from the UST trust fund so that they can improve their training, inspections, and enforcement efforts;
- Requiring EPA and the states to inspect tanks at least every 3 years; and
- Providing EPA and the states additional enforcement authorities.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-529T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-529T).

To view the full testimony, click on the link above.

For more information, contact John Stephenson at (202) 512-3841.

**ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

**Recommendations for Improving the Underground Storage Tank Program**

**What GAO Found**

GAO estimated in its May 2001 report that 89 percent of the 693,107 tanks subject to UST rules had the leak prevention and detection equipment installed, but that more than 200,000 tanks were not being operated and maintained properly, increasing the chance of leaks. States responding to our survey also reported that because of such problems, even tanks with the new equipment continued to leak. EPA and the states attributed these problems primarily to poorly trained staff. While EPA is working with states to identify additional training options, in December 2002, EPA reported that at least 19 to 26 percent of tanks still have problems.

EPA and states do not know how many upgraded tanks still leak because they do not physically inspect all tanks. EPA recommends that tanks be inspected once every 3 years, but more than half of the states do not do this. In addition, more than half of the states lack the authority to prohibit fuel deliveries to problem tanks—one of the most effective ways to enforce compliance. States said they did not have the funds, staff, or authority to inspect more tanks or more strongly enforce compliance.

As of September 2002, EPA and states still had to ensure completion of cleanups for about 99,427 leaks, and initiation of cleanups at about another 43,278. States also face potentially large, but unknown, future workloads in addressing leaks from abandoned and unidentified tanks. Some states said that their current program costs exceed available funds, so states may seek additional federal support to help address this future workload.

Compliance With Federal Operations and Maintenance Requirements Varies Among States

