



Highlights of [GAO-03-581](#), a report to Congressional Requesters

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Federal Planning Requirements for Transportation and Air Quality Protection Could Potentially Be More Efficient and Better Linked

Why GAO Did This Study

To protect the public from harmful emissions, transportation planners in areas with poor air must show that their plans will not make it worse. Every time they update their transportation improvement program (TIP) and their 20-year plan—every 2 and 3 years respectively—federal laws and regulations require that they ensure the emissions from their plans will not exceed the mobile source emissions budget. This is known as “demonstrating conformity.” Areas that fail to do so generally cannot spend federal funds on new projects until they resolve the problem. The Committee asked GAO to determine (1) how many areas have failed, why, and what corrective actions they took, and (2) what issues transportation planners had with the conformity process and what solutions are possible.

What GAO Recommends

To help improve the conformity process, GAO recommends that the relevant federal agencies (1) consider extending the 3-year time frame between required transportation plan updates and asking the Congress to amend the Clean Air Act to change the conformity rules to match, and (2) assess the advantages and disadvantages of statutorily requiring that the emissions budgets in air quality plans be regularly updated with new travel data and emissions models. DOT and EPA generally agreed with these recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-581.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact John Stephenson at (202) 512-3841.

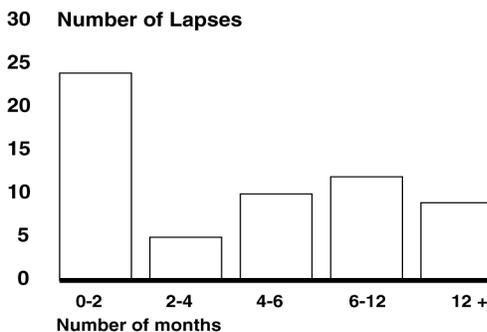
What GAO Found

Since 1997, 56 of the 159 transportation planning areas with air quality problems failed to demonstrate conformity by a required deadline at least once, according to federal agency data, but only five areas had to change their transportation plans as a result. About half of the areas failed because of resource, administrative, or technical problems, such as a lack of time and staff, and resolved the problem in 6 months or less. About one-third of the 253 transportation planners responding to our survey said they anticipate having trouble demonstrating conformity in the future, especially in meeting the more stringent limits on two pollutants resulting from vehicle emissions—ozone and fine particulate matter.

A majority of transportation planners who had trouble demonstrating conformity or failed to do so by a deadline said that the required frequency of demonstrations robs them of time and resources to solve other issues, such as growing congestion. The planners support extending the current 3-year time frame between required updates of the 20-year plan, which could also result in less frequent conformity demonstrations. Under this change, areas would still demonstrate conformity of their TIP every 2 years, and could still update and demonstrate conformity on their long-term plans more frequently than required, such as to add new projects or shift funds. These factors could help to ensure that the change would not have a significant impact on the conformity process’ role to protect air quality.

Transportation planners also noted the difference between their frequent plan updates, which must use the latest emissions model and data (such as the types of vehicles on the road and the number of miles they travel), and air quality plans, with their associated emissions budgets, which are not required to be updated with the current model or data. The transportation planners said this creates conflicts and can result in ineffective changes to an area’s transportation plans. Any proposal to require that air quality plans be regularly updated, however, needs to weigh the benefits against the fact that such updates are difficult and costly.

Length of Conformity Lapses, 1997-2002



Source: GAO analysis of DOT and EPA data.