

Highlights of [GAO-13-115](#) a report to the Chairman, Committee on Environment and Public Works, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) oversees many environmental programs that seek to protect public health and the environment. Substantial noncompliance with these regulations and increasing budget pressures, among other things, led EPA to propose a new enforcement and compliance initiative in fiscal year 2012. This new initiative—Next Generation Compliance—attempts to capitalize on advances in emissions and pollutants monitoring and information technology. Among other things, EPA expects Next Generation Compliance to provide new and more complete enforcement and compliance information and promote greater public transparency and accountability.

GAO was asked to review (1) actions EPA has undertaken in Next Generation Compliance to increase enforcement and compliance transparency and accountability and (2) the extent to which EPA is developing a strategic plan to integrate Next Generation Compliance into its enforcement and compliance program. To conduct this work, GAO reviewed Next Generation Compliance documents and interviewed selected EPA officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that EPA (1) develop a schedule for completing a strategic plan for its Next Generation Compliance initiative in a timely manner and (2) incorporate selected leading practices in federal strategic planning in the plan. EPA agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-13-115](#). For more information, contact David C. Trimble at (202) 512-3841 or trimbled@gao.gov.

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ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

EPA Should Develop a Strategic Plan for Its New Compliance Initiative

What GAO Found

Since introducing its Next Generation Compliance initiative in fiscal year 2012, EPA has taken four primary steps to increase transparency and accountability in enforcement and compliance. According to EPA documents and officials, these actions will provide greater access to data under EPA-regulated programs and make regulated entities more accountable to the public. In this regard, EPA

- formed an electronic reporting task force in December 2011 to provide recommendations for converting from existing paper-based reporting requirements to electronic reporting;
- established a work group in April 2012 to identify advanced emissions and pollutants monitoring technology and evaluate how the agency can better use such technology;
- formed a work group in September 2012 to advance the use of new compliance tools in its enforcement activities, such as in settlement agreements with entities that are found in noncompliance with regulations; and
- increased the public availability of the enforcement and compliance information it currently has available by, among other actions, placing a tool on its enforcement website that allows the public to obtain information about pollutants that are released into local waterways.

EPA has not developed a strategic plan to integrate Next Generation Compliance into its enforcement and compliance program. EPA has prepared some documents on the initiative and its components, but these documents are general in nature and provide little specificity regarding EPA's plans related to Next Generation Compliance. GAO has previously reported that strategic planning for activities below the agencywide level is a leading practice for successful agencies. EPA acknowledges the need for an overall plan for Next Generation Compliance. Developing a plan that incorporates selected leading practices for federal strategic planning could help EPA more effectively integrate Next Generation Compliance into its enforcement and compliance program and promote greater public transparency. Without a strategic plan incorporating these leading practices, EPA may face challenges in helping to ensure that its initiative will achieve its long-term goals of improving compliance and obtaining greater health and environmental benefits from the agency's regulations. Additionally, without a strategic plan to direct its Next Generation Compliance initiative, EPA could waste valuable resources, time, and effort. For example, without proper planning, EPA may pursue emissions monitoring technologies that not all regulated entities—especially the growing numbers of smaller facilities—can fully utilize, thereby requiring EPA to rely on costly individual facility inspections with its limited resources.