Natural Resources and Environment

The United States is rich in natural resources and beauty and, at the same time, home to a strong economy. These features underlie a way of life that is the envy of much of the world. At the same time, however, they pose a challenge to the American people and their elected officials — that is, how do we balance the need to protect these resources for future generations with the need to use them for current economic growth? Natural Resources and Environment contributes to policy debates on that and other questions by conducting a wide range of studies on natural resource and environmental matters.

Key Contacts

Managing Director
Robert A. Robinson

Directors
Lawrence J. Dyckman
Barry T. Hill
Gary L. Jones
John B. Stephenson
James E. Wells, Jr.
David G. Wood

Phone
(202) 512-3841

Mailing Address
U.S. General Accounting Office
Natural Resources & Environment
Room 2T23
441 G Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20548

Description of *our work*

Our work provides timely analyses, recommendations, and policy options to congressional and executive branch officials on ways to improve the government's policies and programs in the following areas: agriculture; federally owned lands; energy supplies; pollution control; the disposal of hazardous and nuclear wastes; nuclear weapons safety, reliability, and proliferation; and science. Consequently, our analysts work mainly on the programs of the Departments of Agriculture, Interior, and Energy; the Environmental Protection Agency; the Nuclear Regulatory Commission; the Army Corps of Engineers; and the National Science Foundation. They work out of offices located in various regions of the country, as well as in Washington, D.C.

We are particularly focused on helping the Congress

- improve the safety of the nation's food supply, taking into consideration the implications of genetically modified foods and grains;
- structure farm programs to enhance the agricultural sector's strength while maintaining stable and affordable food prices;
- improve the government's management of its national forests, parks, and lands;
- ensure secure sources of energy for Americans at stable and affordable prices;
- improve the nation's air and water quality and address multinational environmental issues;
- enhance the economy and effectiveness of efforts to clean up hazardous and nuclear waste sites;
- prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons;
- oversee the government's management of its nuclear weapons stockpile; and
- determine how federal science programs could be better coordinated and focused.

IMPACT OF *our work*

Our work in these areas has made a signficant difference. It is not unusual for the work to result in significant financial benefits to the government and American taxpayer. For example, based upon our work, the Congress recently denied a request by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for an additional $691 million for three EPA programs. We had pointed out that based upon EPA documentation, we could not conclude that the additional funding would improve the programs' results.

Additionally, our work assists the Congress in other ways, even when federal dollars are not saved. For example, our work has been used extensively by policymakers and interest groups during congressional consideration of food safety issues. In that regard, GAO has served as an honest broker of information regarding the shortcomings of the federal food safety system. GAO analyses and recommendations resulted in the Department of Agriculture agreeing to (1) create and implement a new food safety inspection system and (2) clarify the Department's food inspectors' roles, responsibilities, and training needs.

Another example was seen in a recent news headline, "Federal Experts Saw Massive Wildfires Coming." The experts referred to are GAO staff, who made the "eerie prediction" about the likelihood of such wildfires in a report. Since then, GAO has used the increased risk of uncontrollable and often catastrophic wildfires as an example of the need for a coordinated and strategic approach to the problem by the four major federal land management agencies.

HIGHLIGHTS OF RECENT and *future projects*

- Analyses aimed at improving the recently implemented Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point meat inspection system
- Studies of the agricultural sector's transition from federal subsidies to a greater market orientation
- Analyses of the problems of protecting intellectual property rights in the information age
- Evaluation of the effectiveness of federal efforts to restore the Florida Everglades
- Studies of the problems and prospects of deregulating the electricity industry
- Information on the challenges of addressing multinational pollution problems
- Studies aimed at identifying nuclear and other hazardous waste sites and evaluating cleanup strategies
- Analyses of ways to improve the safe storage of nuclear materials at nuclear weapons facilities