

GAO
Accountability · Integrity · Reliability

Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-06-336](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Resources, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government is placing greater emphasis on thinning vegetation on public lands to reduce the risk of wildland fire. To help defray the cost of thinning efforts, it also is seeking to stimulate a market for the resulting material, including the smaller trees, limbs, and brush—referred to as woody biomass—that traditionally have had little or no commercial value. As GAO has reported in the past, the increased use of woody biomass faces obstacles, including the high cost of harvesting and transporting it and an unpredictable supply in some locations. Nevertheless, some entities, such as schools and businesses, are utilizing the material, potentially offering insights for broadening its use.

GAO agreed to (1) identify key factors facilitating the use of woody biomass among selected users, (2) identify challenges these users have faced in using woody biomass, and (3) discuss any insights that these findings may offer for promoting greater use of woody biomass.

In responding to a draft of this report, the Departments of Agriculture, Energy, and the Interior all generally agreed with GAO's findings.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-336.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Woody Biomass Users' Experiences Offer Insights for Government Efforts Aimed at Promoting Its Use

What GAO Found

Financial incentives and benefits associated with using woody biomass were the primary factors facilitating its use among the 13 users GAO reviewed. Four users received financial assistance (such as state or federal grants) to begin their use of woody biomass, three received ongoing financial support related to its use, and several reported energy cost savings over fossil fuels. Using woody biomass also was attractive to some users because it was available, affordable, and environmentally beneficial.

Several users GAO reviewed, however, cited challenges in using woody biomass, such as difficulty obtaining a sufficient supply of the material. For example, two power plants reported running at about 60 percent of capacity because they could not obtain enough material. Some users also reported that they had difficulty obtaining woody biomass from federal lands, instead relying on woody biomass from private lands or on alternatives such as sawmill residues. Some users also cited increased equipment and maintenance costs associated with using the material.

The experiences of the 13 users offer several important insights for the federal government to consider as it attempts to promote greater use of woody biomass. First, if not appropriately designed, efforts to encourage its use may simply stimulate the use of sawmill residues or other alternative wood materials, which some users stated are cheaper or easier to use than woody biomass. Second, the lack of a local logging and milling infrastructure to collect and process forest materials may limit the availability of woody biomass; thus, government activities may be more effective in stimulating its use if they take into account the extent of infrastructure in place. Similarly, government activities such as awarding grants or supplying woody biomass may stimulate its use more effectively if they are tailored to the scale and nature of the targeted users. However, agencies must remain alert to potential unintended ecological consequences of their efforts.

Examples of Woody Biomass Users GAO Reviewed



Source: GAO.
Pulp and paper mill.



Wood-fired heating facility at rural school.