

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-596T](#), a statement for the record to the Subcommittee on Health, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Burn pits help base commanders manage waste generated by U.S. forces overseas, but they also produce harmful emissions that military and other health professionals believe may result in chronic health effects for those exposed.

This statement provides information on the extent to which DOD has assessed any health risks of burn pit use.

This statement is based on a GAO report issued in September 2016 (GAO-16-781). The report was conducted in response to section 313 of the Carl Levin and Howard P. "Buck" McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015. Specifically, GAO assessed the methodology DOD used in conducting a review of the compliance of the military departments and combatant commands with DOD instructions governing the use of burn pits in contingency operations and the adequacy of a DOD report for the defense committees. GAO also obtained updates from DOD on actions taken to assess health risks from burn pits since September 2016.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made two recommendations focused on improving monitoring of burn pit emissions and examining any associated health effects related to burn pit exposure. DOD concurred with one recommendation and partially concurred with the other. GAO continues to believe the recommendations are valid.

View [GAO-18-596T](#). For more information, contact Cary Russell at (202) 512-5431 or russellc@gao.gov

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WASTE MANAGEMENT

DOD Needs to Fully Assess the Health Risks of Burn Pits

What GAO Found

GAO reported in September 2016 that the effects from exposing individuals to burn pit emissions were not well understood, and the Department of Defense (DOD) had not fully assessed the health risks associated with the use of burn pits. Burn pits—shallow excavations or surface features with berms used to conduct open-air burning—were often chosen as a method of waste disposal during recent contingency operations in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility, which extends from the Middle East to Central Asia and includes Iraq and Afghanistan. According to DOD Instruction 6055.01, *DOD Safety and Occupational Health (SOH) Program*, DOD should apply risk-management strategies to eliminate occupational injury or illness and loss of mission capability or resources. The instruction also requires all DOD components to establish procedures to ensure that risk-acceptance decisions were documented, archived, and reevaluated on a recurring basis. Furthermore, DOD Instruction 6055.05, *Occupational and Environmental Health (OEH)*, requires that hazards be identified and risk evaluated as early as possible, including the consideration of exposure patterns, duration, and rates.

While DOD has guidance that applies to burn pit emissions among other health hazards, DOD had not fully assessed the health risks of use of burn pits, according to DOD officials.

According to DOD officials, DOD's ability to assess these risks was limited by a lack of adequate information on (1) the levels of exposure to burn pit emissions and (2) the health impacts these exposures had on individuals. With respect to information on exposure levels, DOD had not collected data from emissions or monitored exposures from burn pits as required by its own guidance. Given the potential use of burn pits near installations and during future contingency operations, establishing processes to monitor burn pit emissions for unacceptable exposures would better position DOD and combatant commanders to collect data that could help assess exposure to risks.

GAO recommended that the Secretary of Defense (1) take steps to ensure CENTCOM and other geographic combatant commands, as appropriate, establish processes to consistently monitor burn pit emissions for unacceptable exposures; and (2) in coordination with the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, specifically examine the relationship between direct, individual, burn pit exposure and potential long-term health-related issues. DOD concurred with the first recommendation and partially concurred with the second. In a May 2018 status update regarding these recommendations, DOD outlined a series of steps it had implemented as well as steps that it intends to implement. The department believes these efforts will further enhance its ability to better monitor burn-pit emissions and examine the relationship between direct, individual, burn pit exposure and potential long-term health related issues. GAO believes the steps DOD is taking are appropriate.