



Highlights of [GAO-04-745T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands, Committee on Resources, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In 1996, the Congress authorized an experimental initiative called the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program that provides funds to increase the quality of visitor experience and enhance resource protection. Under the program, the Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service—all within the Department of the Interior—and the Forest Service—within the U.S. Department of Agriculture—are authorized to establish, charge, collect, and use fees at a number of sites to, among other things, address a backlog of repair and maintenance needs. Also, sites may retain and use the fees they collect. The Congress is now considering, through H.R. 3283, whether to make the program permanent. Central to the debate is how effectively the agencies are using the revenues that they have collected.

This testimony focuses on the potential effect of H.R. 3283 on the issues GAO raised previously in its work on the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program. Specifically, it examines the extent to which H.R. 3283 would affect (1) federal agencies' deferred maintenance programs, (2) the management and distribution of the revenue collected, and (3) interagency coordination on fee collection and use.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-745T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Barry T. Hill at (202) 512-3841 or hillbt@gao.gov.

RECREATION FEES

Comments on the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, H.R. 3283

What GAO Found

H.R. 3283 would provide agencies with a permanent source of funds to better address their maintenance backlog, and by making the program permanent, the act would provide agencies incentive to develop a system to track their deferred maintenance backlogs. According to the Department of the Interior's latest estimates, the deferred maintenance backlog for the Interior agencies participating in the fee demonstration program ranges from \$5.1 billion to \$8.3 billion, with the Park Service alone accounting for an estimated \$4 to \$7 billion. Likewise, the Forest Service, the other participating agency, estimates its total deferred maintenance backlog to be about \$8 billion. GAO's prior work on the Park Service's and Forest Service's backlog has demonstrated that neither agency has accurate and reliable information on its deferred maintenance needs and cannot determine how much of the fee demonstration revenues it spends on reducing its deferred maintenance needs. Furthermore, some agency officials have hesitated to divert resources to develop a process for tracking deferred maintenance because the fee demonstration program is temporary.

H.R. 3283 would allow agencies to reduce the percentage of fee revenue used on-site down to 60 percent, thus providing the agencies with greater flexibility in how they use the revenues. Currently, the demonstration program requires federal land management agencies to maintain at least 80 percent of the collected fee revenues for use on-site. This requirement has helped some demonstration sites generate revenue in excess of their high-priority needs, but the high-priority needs at other sites, which did not collect as much in fee revenues, remained unmet. GAO has suggested that the Congress consider modifying the current 80-percent on-site spending requirement to provide agencies greater flexibility in using fee revenues.

H.R. 3283 would standardize the types of fees federal land management agencies may use and creates a single national pass that provides visitors general access to a variety of recreation sites managed by different agencies and allows for the regional coordination of fees to access multiple nearby sites. GAO's prior reports have demonstrated the need for more effective coordination and cooperation among the agencies to better serve visitors by making the payment of fees more convenient and equitable while reducing visitor confusion about similar or multiple fees being charged at nearby or adjacent federal recreation sites.