



TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH

The Department of Transportation Has Made Progress in Coordinating and Reviewing Its Research Activities

Highlights of [GAO-09-361T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Technology and Innovation, Committee on Science and Technology, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Research, development, and technology (RD&T) activities are vital to meeting the Department of Transportation’s (DOT) priorities, such as increasing safety, enhancing mobility, and supporting the nation’s economic growth. In fiscal year 2008, the department’s RD&T budget totaled over \$1.1 billion, primarily for highway and aviation projects.

Over the years, concerns have been raised about DOT’s capabilities to improve RD&T coordination and evaluation efforts across the agency. In 2004, Congress created DOT’s Research and Innovative Technology Administration (RITA) to coordinate and review the department’s RD&T programs and activities for the purposes of reducing research duplication, enhancing opportunities for joint efforts, and ensuring RD&T activities are meeting goals. In 2006 GAO reported that RITA had made progress toward these ends, but needed to do more.

GAO’s testimony focuses on (1) the importance of coordinating and evaluating RD&T activities and (2) RITA’s progress in implementing GAO’s 2006 recommendations. GAO’s statement is based on its 2006 report, a review of best practices for coordination and evaluation, and follow-up discussions with RITA officials on actions to implement GAO’s recommendations. GAO did not assess whether RITA’s actions have improved the effectiveness of the department’s RD&T investment.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-361T](#). For more information, contact David Wise at (202) 512-2834 or [wised@gao.gov](mailto:wised@gao.gov).

What GAO Found

Coordinating and evaluating research are important elements in ensuring that federal dollars are used efficiently and effectively. Coordinating research enhances collaboration, ensures that questions are explored, and reduces inefficiencies, such as from duplication of research. Evaluating research activities entails comparing research with established performance measures in agency strategic plans and using expert reviews to assess the quality of the research. With DOT’s large RD&T budget—over \$1.1 billion—coordination and evaluation are critical to making cost-effective investment choices in today’s climate of expected trillion-dollar deficits.

RITA has fully implemented five recommendations that GAO made in 2006 aimed at enhancing RITA’s ability to manage and determine the effectiveness of RD&T activities, and partially implemented the remaining two. (See table below.) Regarding implemented recommendations, most notably, RITA has implemented a strategy to coordinate RD&T activities and look for areas where joint efforts would be appropriate. Results of its coordination efforts have identified a number of areas for cross-modal collaboration, including the areas of climate change and freight capacity. RITA has also developed a strategy to ensure that the results of DOT’s research activities are evaluated against best practices, using governmentwide guidance and external stakeholder reviews. Regarding partially implemented recommendations, RITA has not yet developed an overall strategy, evaluation plan, or performance measures that delineate how its activities ensure the effectiveness of the department’s RD&T investment. However, it has developed a process for doing so. In this regard, RITA plans to use an existing departmentwide strategic planning and budget process and collaborative meetings to develop an overall strategy and performance measures. RITA officials expect that it will fully implement activities related to this recommendation by 2012. GAO will continue to monitor RITA’s activities.

Status of RITA’s Implementation of GAO’s 2006 Recommendations

Recommendations	Status
• Develop a strategy for identifying and reviewing all of DOT’s RD&T projects to determine areas of unnecessary duplication, overlap, and opportunities for joint efforts	Implemented
• Develop a strategy to ensure that the results of all of DOT’s RD&T activities are evaluated according to established best practices	Implemented
• Develop a DOT-wide database of all of DOT’s RD&T projects	Implemented
• Develop a summary of all of DOT’s RD&T program evaluations	Implemented
• Develop a description of RITA’s process for systematically evaluating the results of its own multimodal research programs and how this process will be applied to future multimodal research programs that RITA conducts	Implemented
• Develop performance goals, an overall implementing strategy, and an evaluation plan that delineate how the activities and results of its coordination, facilitation, and review practices will further DOT’s mission and ensure the effectiveness of the department’s RD&T investment	Partially implemented
• Develop common performance measures related to DOT’s RD&T activities in consultation with the operating administrations	Partially implemented

Source: GAO analysis of RITA information.