Funding Transfers Cause Project Cancellations and Delays, Strained Relationships, and Management Disruptions

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2003, wildfires burned roughly 4 million acres, destroyed over 5,000 structures, took the lives of 30 firefighters, and cost over $1 billion to suppress. The substantial expense of fighting wildfires has exceeded the funds appropriated for wildfire suppression nearly every year since 1990. To pay for wildfire suppression costs when the funds appropriated are insufficient, the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of the Interior have transferred funds from their other programs.

GAO was asked to identify (1) the amount of funds transferred and reimbursed for wildfire suppression since 1999, and the programs from which agencies transferred funds; (2) the effects on agency programs from which funds were taken; and (3) alternative approaches that could be considered for estimating annual suppression costs and funding wildfire suppression.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends several measures to minimize the impacts of funding transfers and to improve the estimates on which the agencies base their wildfire budgeting requests. Further, GAO is asking the Congress to consider alternative approaches for funding wildfire suppression.

In commenting on the draft report, Forest Service and Interior generally agreed with the report’s findings and recommendations.

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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.