What GAO Found

Many factors affect the length of time it takes to recover the 31 species GAO reviewed. Specifically, 19 of these species have been recently delisted (removed from the list of endangered and threatened species) or are likely to be delisted within the next 25 years either because (1) they faced a primary threat that has been or is being mitigated; (2) they were found to be more prevalent than biologists thought at the time they were listed and/or habitats have been secured for the species; or (3) they are expected to respond relatively quickly to recovery efforts because, for example, they reproduce quickly in the presence of good habitat. The remaining 12 species are much farther away from being delisted, and for some, recovery is uncertain. Some of these species are not expected to recover for many decades because they respond relatively slowly to recovery efforts, for example, because they reproduce slowly. Recovery for the remaining species is uncertain either because their habitat is difficult to protect, or because not enough is known about the threats facing the species or how to mitigate those threats.

Recovery plans have played an important role in the recovery efforts of nearly all of the species GAO reviewed by identifying many of the actions the services' biologists deemed most important to the species' recovery. The services' biologists report that these actions have contributed, at least in part, to the progress made in recovering these species. For example, recovery of the red-cockaded woodpecker is dependent on having sufficient habitat—the species nests in cavities that they peck out of old pine trees, but logging largely eliminated these trees from the woodpecker's range. The recovery plan identifies measures to protect the habitat, including land acquisition and conservation agreements with landowners, as well as steps to provide artificial nest boxes until pines mature enough to provide natural habitat for the birds. The services' biologists told us that these actions have significantly improved this species' prospects for recovery. However, for about one-half of the species GAO reviewed, actions beyond those in the recovery plans also played an important role in progress toward the species' recovery. For example, the banning of the insecticide dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane (DDT) by the Environmental Protection Agency in 1972—a year before the Endangered Species Act was enacted—has been critical to recovery of the bald eagle.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Many Factors Affect the Length of Time to Recover Select Species

September 2006

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Highlights

Accountability Integrity Reliability