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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-1092](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Over the past two decades, provisions of the Food Security Act of 1985, among others, have allowed the Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency in partnership with the Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to add farmlands found to have important resources to the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Farm Service Agency transferred such farmlands to the Service through outright ownership ("fee simple") or through conservation easements. Individual farmlands are managed by the nearest refuge office.

GAO was asked to examine (1) the extent of farmland received by the Service, (2) the extent to which the Service is currently managing its farmlands, and (3) alternatives for managing these lands. To answer these objectives, GAO visited five refuges and surveyed managers responsible for a random sample of 98 farmlands.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Service ensure that its records for all its farmlands are accurate and complete and that it develop a proposal to Congress seeking authority for additional flexibility in dealing with farmlands the Service determines may not be in the best interest of the National Wildlife Refuge System. In commenting on a draft of this report, the Department of the Interior concurred with GAO's recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-1092.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Additional Flexibility Needed to Deal with Farmlands Received from the Department of Agriculture

What GAO Found

Since 1986, the Service reports that it has received at least 1,400 conservation easement and fee-simple farmlands covering 132,000 acres, but the actual number is unknown because the Service's records are incomplete. Scattered across 38 states, these farmlands range in size from less than 1 acre to more than 2,200 acres; most are smaller than 50 acres. In addition, GAO identified farmlands that were not reported by the Service headquarters or regional offices. Therefore, the numbers reported here represent a conservative estimate of the total acreage received from the Farm Service Agency.

The Service is generally not managing a majority of its farmlands. In the past 5 years, only 13 percent have been inspected annually, on average. The Service is thus not adequately ensuring landowners' compliance with easement restrictions. GAO observed ongoing easement violations, including farming encroachment (see photo below). Few refuge offices track changes in land ownership, and basic maintenance has seldom been completed. Several factors have hindered the Service's farmland management. First, refuge officials do not emphasize managing most of the lands because they do not believe they contribute to the refuges' mission. Second, uncertainty about the extent or scope of some easements makes management activity difficult. Third, constrained resources and declining staff hinder completion of management activities. Nevertheless, GAO found that farmlands most closely aligned with refuge goals receive considerably more attention.

The Service possesses limited alternatives for managing its farmlands. Alternatives include (1) resetting refuge priorities to ensure that farmlands are given management attention, (2) requesting additional resources, and (3) paying little or no management attention to the farmlands. The Service has in most cases chosen the third alternative, and refuge officials indicated that this approach is unlikely to change. Because these lands are part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, under current law the Service cannot dispose of unwanted farmlands, regardless of their value to the refuge system's mission. Consequently, the Service may need additional flexibility on a limited and short-term basis to resolve the issue of unwanted farmlands.

Farming Encroachment in Violation of a Wetland Easement, April 2007



Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.