Army’s Approach for Acquiring Land Is Not Guided by Up-to-Date Strategic Plan or Always Communicated Effectively

Recently, the Army forecast that it would experience a 4.5-million-acre training land shortfall by 2013 and proposed to purchase additional land adjacent to certain existing training ranges. In response to a congressional request, GAO reviewed the Army’s approach for acquiring training land. This report (1) evaluates the Army’s approach to the acquisition of training land, (2) describes the Army’s consideration of alternatives and assessment of the environmental and economic effects, and (3) analyzes the Army’s effectiveness in communicating its approach for making decisions to pursue these acquisitions before the Office of the Secretary of Defense’s (OSD) approval. GAO reviewed the Army strategic plan for training lands and other relevant documents, and focused on all five land acquisitions since 2002 at Fort Irwin, California; three training sites in Hawaii; and the proposed expansion of the Piñon Canyon Maneuver Site in Colorado.

GAO recommends that (1) the Army develop and implement a process to update periodically its strategic plan for training ranges to reflect current needs and (2) OSD and the Army jointly review their strategies for communicating major land acquisitions and agree on a common practice that would address concerns about early disclosure and provide the Army and the other services some flexibility to engage the public. DOD generally agrees with the recommendations.

Because of a lack of specificity in OSD and Army communication strategies, the Army has not been consistent or always effective in communicating its approach to acquire training land. According to OSD’s policy, no major land acquisition proposal may be made public through official notice until OSD has approved the acquisition. The policy is unclear what public notification, such as informal community outreach, is permissible prior to approval. While the Army’s strategic plan emphasizes that it is important to engage the public early in the process, it lacks specificity as to when and in what form this outreach should take place. In California and Hawaii, the Army followed the strategy articulated in its plan, openly explaining why it was acquiring land, which helped ease the start of the acquisition process. Army officials and community groups said that the Army did not adequately explain its reasoning for the proposed expansion at Piñon Canyon. In this case, the public at times relied on rumors and leaked documents. These information sources often did not provide clear, complete, or accurate data. Without a consistent and clear DOD-wide practice that both addresses concerns about early disclosure of land acquisitions and permits some flexibility to engage the public, the Army and other services are likely to experience communication problems similar to those encountered at Piñon Canyon.