



Highlights of [GAO-10-126](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Agriculture, House of Representatives.

## Why GAO Did This Study

A serious problem for U.S. communities along the U.S.-Mexico border is the lack of access to safe drinking water and sanitation systems. Inadequate systems can pose risks to human health and the environment, including the risk of waterborne diseases. Numerous federal programs provide grants, loans, or other assistance to rural U.S. communities, including those in the border region, for drinking water and wastewater projects.

GAO was asked to determine (1) the amount of federal funding provided to rural U.S. communities in the border region for drinking water and wastewater systems and (2) the effectiveness of federal efforts to meet the water and wastewater needs in the region. GAO analyzed agency financial data; reviewed statutes, regulations, policies, and procedures; and interviewed federal, state, local, and private sector officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO suggests that Congress consider requiring federal agencies to develop a coordinated plan to improve the effectiveness of drinking water and wastewater programs in the border region and recommends that the agencies take steps to comply with statutory and regulatory requirements. Because USDA and DOD generally believe they are in compliance with relevant statutory and regulatory requirements; they did not fully concur with this recommendation. GAO believes that its findings and recommendations remain valid.

View [GAO-10-126](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Anu K. Mittal at (202) 512-9846 or [mittala@gao.gov](mailto:mittala@gao.gov).

# RURAL WATER INFRASTRUCTURE

## Improved Coordination and Funding Processes Could Enhance Federal Efforts to Meet Needs in the U.S.-Mexico Border Region

### What GAO Found

Seven federal agencies—the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (the Corps), Economic Development Administration (EDA), the Indian Health Service (IHS), and the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation)—obligated at least \$1.4 billion for drinking water and wastewater projects to assist communities in the U.S.-Mexico border region from fiscal years 2000 through 2008. USDA and EPA obligated 78 percent, or about \$1.1 billion, of the total \$1.4 billion—with USDA obligating 37 percent, or \$509 million, and EPA obligating 41 percent, or \$568 million. Agencies provided assistance for a variety of drinking water and wastewater activities, such as constructing or improving treatment facilities and installing distribution lines. For example, of the \$509 million total, USDA obligated about \$502 million to public utilities or similar entities for construction of or improvements to water and wastewater infrastructure. It obligated over \$7 million to individuals in the border region for household projects, such as repairs to indoor plumbing.

Federal efforts to meet drinking water and wastewater needs in the border region have been ineffective because most federal agencies (1) have not comprehensively assessed the needs in the region, (2) lack coordinated policies and processes, and (3) in some cases have not complied with statutory requirements and agency regulations. Although federal agencies have assembled some data and conducted limited studies of drinking water and wastewater conditions in the border region, the resulting patchwork of data does not provide a comprehensive assessment of the region's needs. Without such an assessment, federal agencies cannot target resources toward the most urgent needs or provide assistance to communities that do not have the technical and financial resources to initiate a proposal for assistance. In contrast, IHS has collected data on water and wastewater conditions for each tribal reservation. As a result, the agency can select projects that target the greatest need. In addition, although some federal agencies recognize the importance of a collaborative and coordinated process to increase program effectiveness, agencies' policies and processes are generally incompatible or not collaborative with those of other agencies. For example, most federal programs require separate documentation to meet the same requirement and the agencies do not consistently coordinate in selecting projects. As a result, applicants face significant administrative burdens and project completion can be delayed. Moreover, GAO found that some agencies do not always meet the requirements stipulated in federal statutes and agency regulations concerning how they are to determine the eligibility of applicants or projects and how they are to prioritize funds. For example, USDA and HUD do not ensure that recipients' use of targeted funds intended for use in the border region complies with statutory requirements for establishing project priorities in the border region. Finally, the Corps has not established any guidance to ensure funds are targeted to those projects with the greatest need.