GEOSTATIONARY OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL SATELLITES

Improvements Needed in Continuity Planning and Involvement of Key Users

What GAO Found

NOAA has made progress on the GOES-R acquisition, but key instruments have experienced challenges and important milestones have been delayed. The GOES-R program awarded key contracts for its flight and ground projects, and these are in development. However, two instruments have experienced technical issues that led to contract cost increases, and significant work remains on other development efforts. In addition, since 2006, the launch dates of the first two satellites in the series have been delayed by about 3 years. As a result, NOAA may not be able to meet its policy of having a backup satellite in orbit at all times, which could lead to a gap in coverage if GOES-14 or GOES-15 fails prematurely (see graphic).

Even though there may be a gap in backup coverage, NOAA has not established adequate continuity plans for its geostationary satellites. To its credit, NOAA has established a policy to always have a backup satellite available and high-level plans if that policy is not met. Specifically, in the event of a satellite failure with no backup available, NOAA plans to reduce to a single satellite and, if available, rely on a satellite from an international partner. However, NOAA does not have plans that include processes, procedures, and resources needed to transition to a single or an international satellite. Without such plans, NOAA faces an increased risk that users will lose access to critical data.

While NOAA has identified GOES data users and involved internal users in developing and prioritizing the GOES-R requirements, it has not adequately involved other federal users that rely on GOES data. Specifically, NOAA’s processes for developing and prioritizing satellite requirements do not include documented input from other federal agencies. Further, since 2006, the GOES-R program has undergone significant changes (such as the removal of certain satellite data products), but these have not been communicated to federal agencies. Until improvements are made in NOAA’s processes for involving key federal users, these users may not be able to meet mission requirements.