

Highlights of [GAO-11-15](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Finance, U.S. Senate.

Why GAO Did This Study

The mission of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is to safeguard and preserve government records, ensuring continuing access to the essential documentation of the rights of American citizens and the actions of their government. However, in today's environment of fast-evolving information technology, federal agencies are creating vast and growing volumes of electronic records while continuing to create physical records in large numbers.

Accordingly, GAO was asked to assess NARA's effectiveness in overseeing the governmentwide management of records, including commenting on its capacity to identify risk of unlawful destruction of federal records; describe its ability to preserve permanent records; and assess its policies, procedures, and plans supporting key management and oversight capabilities (collaboration, governance, and human capital). To do so, GAO analyzed NARA documentation in these areas, interviewed agency officials, and reviewed prior work.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to help NARA build on its recent oversight activities and to fill gaps in its risk management and human capital management. In comments on a draft of the report, NARA concurred.

[View GAO-11-15 or key components.](#)
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NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

Oversight and Management Improvements Initiated, but More Action Needed

What GAO Found

The effectiveness of NARA's oversight has been improved by recent increases in its oversight activities: NARA has conducted its first governmentwide records management self-assessment survey, resumed agency inspections after a long gap, and expanded its reporting (including giving more complete information about specific agencies). These efforts have provided a fuller picture of governmentwide records management: in particular, NARA found that almost 80 percent of agencies were at moderate to high risk of unlawful destruction of records. Reporting of such results may also help influence agencies to give more priority to records management, which has historically been given low priority. However, these initiatives have limitations. For example, NARA's efforts to validate self-reported survey data are limited, as are its plans for inspections of agency records management; addressing these limitations could enhance the usefulness of these efforts as they continue to be developed. NARA also oversees agency records management through its review and approval of the schedules under which agencies may dispose of records. Following an extended effort to get agencies to schedule electronic records and systems, NARA increased the number of schedules approved per year. However, it has also increased the backlog of schedules awaiting its approval, increasing the risk that NARA's success in promoting scheduling could bring in more schedules than it can handle in a timely manner.

NARA faces challenges in preserving permanent records largely because of their volume, the finite resources available, and the technological challenges posed by electronic records. NARA has a large and persistent backlog of records on paper and other media needing preservation actions. Although it treated nearly 116,000 cubic feet of at-risk archival records in fiscal year 2009, the percentage of backlog remained constant at about 65 percent, and holdings requiring preservation grew from about 2.4 million cubic feet in 2008 to about 2.6 million cubic feet in 2009. For electronic records, NARA has an electronic records archive system that is still under development and does not yet include planned preservation functions. Until the system and its preservation capabilities are fully implemented, there is reduced assurance that NARA can ensure the preservation of all electronic records.

NARA's policies and procedures for collaboration, selected aspects of governance, and human capital are generally aligned with its strategic planning. For example, it is participating in numerous collaborative activities that support the goals and strategies in its strategic plan. However, more action is needed. For example, with regard to governance, although its organizational responsibilities are generally aligned with its strategic plan, NARA has not established an enterprise risk management capability, reducing its ability to anticipate future challenges and avoid potential crises. Finally, NARA has developed and begun to implement a strategic human capital plan, but this implementation has been delayed, which hinders the agency's ability to ensure that it has the workforce and skills it needs.