

## Why GAO Did This Study

Advisory groups—those established under the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) and other groups not subject to the act—can play an important role in the development of policy and government regulations. There are more than 1,000 FACA advisory groups and an unknown number of non-FACA advisory groups governmentwide. Non-FACA groups include intergovernmental groups. Section 21 of Pub. L. No. 111-139 requires GAO to conduct routine investigations to identify programs, agencies, offices, and initiatives with duplicative goals and activities. In that context, GAO reviewed (1) the extent to which the Department of Transportation's (DOT) and Department of Energy's (DOE) assessment process helps ensure advisory group efforts are not duplicative and what challenges, if any, exist in assessing potential duplication, and (2) to what extent DOT and DOE advisory groups are useful in assisting their respective agencies in carrying out their missions and how the groups' usefulness could be enhanced. GAO selected DOT and DOE for review based on knowledge of these agencies' advisory groups. GAO interviewed agency officials; reviewed advisory group documentation; and conducted case studies of five advisory groups.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOT and DOE document specific steps to assess potential duplication among FACA and non-FACA advisory groups and develop and make public basic information identifying non-FACA advisory groups to further inform periodic assessments. DOT and DOE agreed to consider the recommendations.

View [GAO-12-472](#). For more information, contact Linda Calbom at (206) 287-4809 or [calboml@gao.gov](mailto:calboml@gao.gov).

## FEDERAL ADVISORY GROUPS

### DOT and DOE Can Take Steps to Better Assess Duplication Risk and Enhance Usefulness

## What GAO Found

Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) and Department of Transportation (DOT) and Department of Energy (DOE) guidance require officials to check for duplication prior to filing a charter to establish a new or renew an existing FACA advisory group. However, GAO found that DOT and DOE's processes for assessing duplication are often informal, and neither agency has specific steps identified for making such an assessment. Using an informal approach without specific steps makes it more likely that agency assessments for duplication will be inconsistent or incomplete. In addition, while basic information about the 15 DOT and 21 DOE fiscal year 2010 FACA advisory groups is publicly available in the FACA database, including designated points of contact and the objectives of the groups, no such information is readily available for non-FACA advisory groups. This limits the agencies' ability to fully assess the universe of advisory groups for particular topic areas. DOT and DOE officials faced some challenges identifying and collecting information for the 19 DOT and 33 DOE non-FACA advisory groups GAO reviewed, relying on various sources and Internet searches to gather basic information, since neither agency maintains an inventory of its non-FACA advisory groups and their activities. In addition, advisory groups often address complex and highly technical issues that span across agencies. For example, one advisory group GAO identified focused on experimental and theoretical research in nuclear physics. Agency officials familiar with these types of technical topic areas and other potential stakeholders covering these same topics are best positioned to assess the potential for unnecessary duplication and would be even better positioned to do so if the departments develop specific assessment steps and enhance the visibility of non-FACA advisory groups.

DOT and DOE advisory groups can be effective tools for agencies to gather input on topics of interest by informing agency leaders about issues of importance to the agencies' missions, consolidating input from multiple sources, and providing input at a relatively low cost. To further review the usefulness of advisory groups, GAO conducted case studies on five DOT and DOE FACA and non-FACA advisory groups and identified several practices that could enhance the usefulness of these advisory groups and, in some cases, also help avoid duplication. These practices include the following:

- securing clear agency commitment,
- finding a balance between responsiveness to the agency and independence,
- leveraging resources through collaboration with similar groups, and
- evaluating the group's usefulness to identify future directions for the group or actions to improve its usefulness.

The practices identified can help agencies leverage the advice produced by advisory groups to more efficiently and effectively address topics of importance to the agencies. For example, DOE officials from a FACA advisory group stated that coordination with officials involved in related groups helps to ensure sharing of useful information and that efforts are complementary rather than duplicative.