

Why GAO Did This Study

NTIS was established by statute in 1950 to collect scientific and technical research reports, maintain a bibliographic record and repository of these reports, and disseminate them to the public. NTIS charges fees for its products and services and is required by law to be financially self-sustaining to the fullest extent possible.

GAO was mandated by Congress to update its 2001 report on aspects of NTIS's operations and the reports in its collection. Specifically, GAO's objectives were to determine (1) how NTIS is currently organized and operates, including its functions, current staffing level, reported cost of operations, and revenue sources; (2) the age of and demand trends for reports added to NTIS's repository; and (3) the extent to which these reports are readily available from other public sources. To do this, GAO reviewed agency documentation, analyzed a sample of reports added to NTIS's collection from fiscal years 1990 through 2011 (reports from the period since GAO's last study and other older reports), and interviewed relevant agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is suggesting that Congress reassess the appropriateness and viability of the fee-based model under which NTIS currently operates for disseminating technical information to determine whether the use of this model should be continued. In comments on a draft of this report, the Department of Commerce stated that NTIS believes GAO's conclusions do not fully reflect the value that the agency provides. However, GAO maintains that its conclusions and suggestion to Congress are warranted.

View [GAO-13-99](#). For more information, contact Valerie C. Melvin at (202) 512-6304 or melvinv@gao.gov

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

National Technical Information Service's Dissemination of Technical Reports Needs Congressional Attention

What GAO Found

As a component of the Department of Commerce, the National Technical Information Service (NTIS) is organized into five primary offices that offer the public and federal agencies a variety of products and services. As of late October 2012, NTIS was supported by 181 staff, all except 6 of which held full-time positions. NTIS reports its progress toward agency goals to the Deputy Secretary of Commerce, and the Director of NTIS reports to the Director of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology. In addition, NTIS receives oversight of its functions and strategic direction from an advisory board with members appointed by the Secretary of Commerce. NTIS's product and service offerings include, among other things, subscription access to reports contained in its repository in both print and electronic formats, distribution of print-based informational materials to federal agencies' constituents, and digitization and scanning services.

NTIS revenues are generated exclusively from direct sales or subscriptions for its products and services. NTIS reported that net revenues from all its functions (products and services) totaled about \$1.5 million in fiscal year 2011. However, over most of the last 11 years, its costs have exceeded revenues by an average of about \$1.3 million for its products. While NTIS has not recovered all of its costs for products through subscriptions and other fees, it has been able to remain financially self-sustaining because of revenues generated from its services such as distribution and order fulfillment, web hosting, and e-training. The NTIS strategic plan states that the electronic dissemination of government technical information by other federal agencies has contributed to reduced demand for NTIS's products. As a result, the agency is taking steps to reduce its net costs, such as improving business processes and increasing the breadth and depth of its collection.

NTIS's repository has been growing with mostly older reports, but the demand for more recent reports is greater. Specifically, NTIS added approximately 841,500 reports to its repository during fiscal years 1990 through 2011, and approximately 62 percent of these had publication dates of 2000 or earlier. However, the agency was more likely to distribute (by direct sale or through a subscription) reports published more recently. For example, GAO estimated that 100 percent of the reports published from 2009 through 2011 had been distributed at least once, while only about 21 percent of reports published more than 20 years ago had been.

Of the reports added to NTIS's repository during fiscal years 1990 through 2011, GAO estimates that approximately 74 percent were readily available from other public sources. These reports were often available either from the issuing organization's website, the federal Internet portal (<http://www.USA.gov>), or from another source located through a web search. Reports published from 1990 to 2011 were more likely to be readily available elsewhere than those published in 1989 or earlier. Further, GAO estimated that 95 percent of the reports available from sources other than NTIS were available free of charge. NTIS's declining revenue associated with its basic statutory function and the charging for information that is often freely available elsewhere suggests that the fee-based model under which NTIS currently operates for disseminating technical information may no longer be viable and appropriate.