

Why GAO Did This Study

NMFS and FWS have primary federal responsibility for managing fish and wildlife. The missions of NMFS and FWS have some broad similarities, which have prompted long-standing questions about whether merging the agencies would improve the efficiency or effectiveness of their programs. This report examines (1) the extent to which NMFS and FWS share key programmatic responsibilities, (2) potential benefits and drawbacks identified by agency officials and stakeholders of merging NMFS into FWS, and (3) potential benefits and drawbacks identified by agency officials and stakeholders of alternative organizational options. To address these issues, GAO reviewed agency documents and conducted 97 semistructured interviews with current and former agency officials and a wide array of the agencies' stakeholders, including organizations representing fishing and conservation interests. GAO performed a content analysis of interview responses.

GAO is not making any recommendations. This report presents information that Congress and the administration could consider in determining whether to reorganize federal fish and wildlife agencies. GAO provided a draft of this report for review and comment to the Departments of Commerce and the Interior. Commerce provided technical comments that were incorporated, as appropriate. Interior did not provide comments.

GOVERNMENT REORGANIZATION

Potential Benefits and Drawbacks of Merging the National Marine Fisheries Service into the Fish and Wildlife Service

What GAO Found

While the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) share certain key programmatic responsibilities, they also have programmatic responsibilities unique to each agency. The agencies largely carry out their shared responsibilities independently. For example, both agencies implement the Endangered Species Act, but NMFS generally does so for species found in marine habitats and FWS for species found in fresh water or on land. NMFS and FWS also have responsibilities that are unique to each agency. One of NMFS's unique responsibilities is the federal management of marine fisheries and one of FWS's unique responsibilities is the management of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Officials and stakeholders identified several potential benefits and drawbacks in a possible merger of NMFS into FWS. In many cases, officials and stakeholders differed in their views, as illustrated by the following:

- One potential benefit is improving the efficiency of implementing the Endangered Species Act. Currently, when a proposed federal project—such as building a road—affects species managed by both NMFS and FWS, both agencies review the project. Some officials noted that in some cases they spend a significant amount of time coordinating their reviews and, in these cases, it would be more efficient if a single agency were implementing the act. Other officials, however, said that having a single agency implement the act may not achieve significant efficiencies, since determining how to best minimize effects of a project on multiple species is time-consuming regardless of whether one or two agencies are involved.
- A potential drawback is how a merger might change decision making for fisheries management. For example, merging the agencies would shift responsibility for approving fishery management plans to the Secretary of the Interior from the Secretary of Commerce, and some officials and stakeholders believed that the Department of the Interior would emphasize conserving fish populations more and consider the economic effects of management decisions on fishing communities less than NMFS does. Others, however, believed a merger would have little overall effect on fishery management. They said that because the framework for managing federal fisheries, including the criteria for evaluating fishery management plans, is established by statute, transferring approval authority to the Secretary of the Interior would not change fishery management decisions.

Officials and stakeholders also identified potential benefits and drawbacks of several alternative organizational options that have previously been proposed—such as moving all of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) into Interior, or creating an overall department of natural resources, or establishing NOAA as a stand-alone agency. For example, moving all of NOAA into Interior could better integrate natural resource management by bringing many aspects of federal land and ocean management under the same department, but it could diminish attention to ocean issues since NOAA would be competing with other Interior agencies for funding. Overall, officials and stakeholders generally said the drawbacks of reorganizing the agencies outweigh the benefits.