

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-35](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Environment and the Economy, Committee on Energy and Commerce, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

USDA and Interior manage over 600 million acres of land, including sites contaminated from prior uses or events, such as mining or toxic spills. These lands are managed by five Interior agencies, including BLM and the National Park Service, and five USDA agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service. These agencies must identify and report to EPA certain facilities that may threaten human health or the environment and, under some circumstances, clean them up. They must also report cost estimates for addressing contamination at certain sites, called environmental liabilities.

GAO was asked to review the status of USDA's and Interior's potentially contaminated sites. This report examines USDA's and Interior's (1) efforts to identify these sites, (2) funding to address the sites, (3) reported environmental liabilities, and (4) EPA's role in addressing the sites. GAO reviewed relevant laws and government accounting standards; examined agencies' policies, site inventory data from September 2013 to July 2014, and financial statements; and interviewed EPA, Interior, and USDA officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that USDA develop plans and procedures for completing its site inventories and that EPA clarify which USDA and Interior sites need an environmental assessment. Interior and EPA generally agreed with GAO's findings. USDA disagreed that its incomplete inventory affects the effectiveness of its cleanup programs, but GAO continues to believe that effective program management requires reliable data.

View [GAO-15-35](#). For more information, contact J. Alfredo Gómez at 202-512-3841 or [gomezj@gao.gov](mailto:gomezj@gao.gov)

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## HAZARDOUS WASTE

### Agencies Should Take Steps to Improve Information on USDA's and Interior's Potentially Contaminated Sites

#### What GAO Found

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of the Interior (Interior) have identified many contaminated and potentially contaminated sites, but neither agency has a complete inventory. As of April 2014, USDA had identified 1,491 contaminated sites and many potentially contaminated sites, including landfills and shooting ranges. However, USDA does not have a reliable, centralized site inventory or plans and procedures for completing one, in particular, for abandoned mines. Without a reliable inventory or plans and procedures for developing one, USDA cannot effectively manage its cleanup programs. As of April 2014, Interior had an inventory of 4,722 sites with confirmed or likely contamination. In addition, Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) had identified over 30,000 abandoned mines that were not yet assessed for contamination, and this inventory is not complete. BLM is working to improve the completeness and accuracy of its inventory.

In fiscal year 2013, USDA allocated over \$22 million for environmental cleanup efforts, and Interior allocated over \$13 million. Specifically, in fiscal year 2013, USDA allocated about (1) \$3.7 million for cleanup projects department-wide, primarily for one large site; (2) \$4.3 million to mitigate contamination at grain silos and foreclosure properties; and (3) approximately \$14 million for the U.S. Forest Service to assess and clean up sites. In fiscal year 2013, Interior allocated almost \$10 million for cleanup projects department-wide, the National Park Service allocated an additional \$2.7 million and the Fish and Wildlife Service allocated over \$800,000 for environmental assessment and cleanup projects. In addition, BLM allocated more than \$34 million to its hazardous waste management and abandoned mine programs.

Both USDA and Interior report probable and reasonably estimable environmental liabilities on their financial statements. In fiscal year 2013, USDA reported environmental liabilities of \$176 million, most of which was for asbestos cleanup. Interior reported environmental liabilities of \$192 million to address 434 sites. Interior also disclosed that it will incur \$62 million to \$139 million in cleanup costs at government-acknowledged sites—sites with damage caused by nonfederal entities. The majority of the costs Interior disclosed were for cleanup activities at 85 abandoned mines. As USDA and Interior complete their inventories and assess them for contamination, it might be expected that related environmental costs for both agencies will increase as additional sites are considered.

The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) role with regard to USDA and Interior sites is to maintain a list of potentially contaminated sites based on data from these agencies, take steps to assure that the agencies assess these sites for contamination, determine whether the sites should be proposed for the National Priorities List, and oversee certain cleanup activities. EPA has compiled a docket list of 260 USDA sites and 528 Interior sites that may pose health or environmental risks, most of which have been assessed. Disagreement with USDA and Interior over their need to assess the remaining sites and differing information on whether this requirement has been met at some sites means EPA cannot assure that the assessments are conducted in a timely manner and, ultimately, that sites most in need of remediation are addressed.