

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-781](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

Burn pits help base commanders manage waste generated by U.S. forces overseas, but they also produce harmful emissions that military and other health professionals believe may result in chronic health effects for those exposed. Section 313 of the NDAA for FY 2015 requires the Secretary of Defense to review DOD compliance with law and guidance regarding the disposal of covered waste in burn pits. DOD submitted a report on the results of its review in March 2016.

Section 313 also includes a provision for GAO to assess DOD's report and its compliance with applicable DOD instruction and law. This report evaluates the extent to which (1) DOD's report addressed the elements required in section 313; (2) DOD, including combatant commands, issued guidance for burn pit use that addresses applicable legislative requirements; and (3) DOD has assessed any health risks of burn pit use. GAO compared DOD's report to elements required in section 313, reviewed policies and procedures and interviewed DOD officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO made three recommendations to include establishing policies and procedures and ensuring research specifically examines the relationship between direct burn pit exposure and long-term health issues. DOD concurred with the first recommendation and partially concurred with the second, citing research it has or has plans to conduct. GAO agrees this research contributes to general understanding but continues to believe more specific research is needed.

View [GAO-16-781](#). For more information, contact Cary Russell at (202) 512-5431 or [RussellC@gao.gov](mailto:RussellC@gao.gov).

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## WASTE MANAGEMENT

# DOD Has Generally Addressed Legislative Requirements on the Use of Burn Pits but Needs to Fully Assess Health Effects

## What GAO Found

In assessing the Department of Defense's (DOD) March 2016 report to Congress on the use of burn pits, GAO found that it generally addressed the requirements in section 313 of the Carl Levin and Howard P. "Buck" McKeon National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2015. To complete this report, DOD tasked the military services, the Joint Staff, and the overseas combatant commands to provide information on the requirements in the mandate, including policies and procedures related to the disposal of covered waste (including certain types of hazardous waste, medical waste, and items such as tires, treated wood, and batteries) in burn pits during contingency operations. GAO found that DOD's report fully addressed four of the seven reporting requirements and partially addressed the remaining three. For example, the report addressed who is responsible for ensuring compliance with the legislative requirements, but partially addressed whether the waste categories are appropriately and clearly distinguished in surveys and assessments.

Although DOD established guidance to meet applicable legislative requirements through the issuance of DOD Instruction 4715.19, U.S. Central Command is the only overseas geographic combatant command that has established complementary policies and procedures for implementing this guidance. The instruction applies to all the combatant commands, but it does not specify how combatant commanders will ensure compliance with requirements in the instruction. Officials from the other geographic combatant commands stated that their commands have not developed similar policies and procedures because they do not utilize burn pits and there is an absence of current contingency operations in their respective areas of responsibility. Nonetheless, while most of the overseas geographic commands may not currently be involved in contingency operations within their areas of responsibility, waste disposal would likely be required if such operations arise in the future, and the use of burn pits would be one option for disposing of waste. Establishing policies and procedures would better position these commands to implement DOD's instruction.

The effects of exposing individuals to burn pit emissions are not well understood, and DOD has not fully assessed these health risks. DOD officials stated that there are short-term effects from being exposed to toxins from the burning of waste. However, the officials also stated that DOD does not have enough data to confirm whether direct exposure to burn pits causes long-term health issues. Although DOD and the Department of Veterans Affairs have commissioned studies to enhance their understanding of burn pit emissions, the current lack of data on emissions specific to burn pits and related individual exposures limits efforts to characterize potential long-term health impacts on servicemembers and other base personnel. A 2011 report by the Institute of Medicine outlined the data needed for assessing exposures and potential related health risks, and the Department of Veterans Affairs has established a registry to collect some information. However, DOD has not undertaken data-gathering and research efforts to specifically examine this relationship to fully understand any associated health risks.