

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-43](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Indian Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Indian tribes and their members hold considerable energy resources and may use these resources to provide economic benefits and improve the well-being of their communities. However, GAO and others have found that Indian energy development is hindered by several factors, such as a complex regulatory framework, BIA workforce challenges, and limited access to energy markets.

Tribes and their members determine how to use their energy resources. In doing so, they work with multiple federal agencies with various roles in the development process—including a regulatory role, a role as provider of technical and financial assistance, or as a purchaser of energy.

GAO was asked to evaluate issues related to Indian energy development. This report examines, among other things, (1) federal efforts to help overcome factors that hinder development, (2) BIA's efforts to address workforce challenges, and (3) federal efforts to implement a preference authority to purchase energy from tribes. GAO analyzed federal data and documents and interviewed tribal and federal officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 10 recommendations, including that the Secretary of the Interior identify resources and a funding model for the Energy Subgroup, involve other agencies in the Service Center so it is a single point of contact for the regulatory process, and require BIA to undertake workforce planning activities. GAO is also recommending that the Administrator of the GSA develop implementing guidance relating to purchasing energy from tribes. Interior, DOE, and GSA concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-17-43](#). For more information, contact Frank Rusco, (202) 512-3841 or ruscof@gao.gov

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INDIAN ENERGY DEVELOPMENT

Additional Actions by Federal Agencies Are Needed to Overcome Factors Hindering Development

What GAO Found

Two key federal initiatives led by the Department of the Interior (Interior)—the interagency White House Council on Native American Affairs' Energy Subgroup (Energy Subgroup) and Interior's Indian Energy Service Center (Service Center)—were implemented to help improve collaboration and the effectiveness of federal efforts to fulfill management responsibilities for Indian lands, assist tribes in developing their energy resources, and overcome any related challenges. However, the Energy Subgroup and the Service Center have not incorporated leading collaborative practices, which may limit the effectiveness of these initiatives to address the factors that hinder Indian energy development. For example, GAO found the following:

- **Energy Subgroup:** Participating agencies have dedicated few staff and financial resources to the Subgroup and have not identified resources needed or a funding model—a leading practice to sustain collaborative efforts. Some participating agency officials noted that the effectiveness of the Subgroup is limited without dedicated resources. They also stated that key activities completed to date by the Subgroup are the result of agencies voluntarily applying budgetary resources to specific activities. Without dedicated resources and a funding model to support its activities, the extent to which the Energy Subgroup will be able to effectively accomplish its goals is unclear.
- **Service Center:** Interior has recognized the need for collaboration in the regulatory process and described the Service Center as a central point of collaboration for permitting that will break down barriers between federal agencies. However, some regulatory agencies, such as the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have not been included as participants. Without the involvement of key regulatory agencies, the Service Center will be limited in its ability to improve efficiencies in the regulatory process for Indian energy development.

GAO and others have previously reported that Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) has longstanding workforce challenges that have hindered Indian energy development. In this review, GAO found that BIA has high vacancy rates at some agency offices and that the agency has not conducted key workforce planning activities, such as an assessment of work skills gaps. These workforce issues further contribute to BIA's inability to effectively support Indian energy development. Federal internal control standards recommend agencies identify the key skills and competencies their workforces need to achieve their goals and assess any skills gaps. Until BIA undertakes such activities, it cannot ensure that it has a workforce with the right skills, appropriately aligned to meet the agency's goals and tribal priorities.

A provision in the Energy Policy Act of 2005 authorizes the federal government, the largest single consumer of energy in the nation, to give preference to tribes for purchases of electricity or other energy products. However, the General Services Administration (GSA), the federal agency with primary responsibility for purchasing energy, has not developed guidance to implement this provision government-wide; doing so could help to increase tribal access to the federal government's energy purchasing programs.