

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-653](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Marine debris—waste such as discarded plastic and abandoned fishing gear and vessels in the ocean—is a global problem that poses economic and environmental challenges. The Marine Debris Act, enacted in 2006, requires the committee to coordinate a program of marine debris research and activities among federal agencies. The act also requires the committee to submit biennial reports to Congress that include certain elements such as an analysis of the effectiveness of the committee's recommendations.

GAO was asked to review federal efforts to address marine debris. This report examines (1) how the committee coordinates among federal agencies and the process for determining membership, (2) the extent to which the committee's biennial reports contain required elements, and (3) experts' suggestions on actions the federal government could take to most effectively address marine debris. GAO examined the Marine Debris Act and committee reports, compared committee practices with leading collaboration practices, interviewed federal agency officials, and interviewed a nongeneralizable sample of 14 marine debris experts selected to reflect various sectors and experiences with different types of marine debris.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that NOAA establish a time frame for documenting membership and the committee develop processes to analyze the effectiveness of its efforts and identify priority funding. The agency agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-19-653](#). For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell at (202) 512-3841 or fennella@gao.gov.

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MARINE DEBRIS

Interagency Committee Members Are Taking Action, but Additional Steps Could Enhance the Federal Response

What GAO Found

The Marine Debris Research, Prevention, and Reduction Act, as amended, (Marine Debris Act) designated six agencies as members of the Interagency Marine Debris Coordinating Committee and specifies that members shall include senior officials from certain other agencies as the Secretary of Commerce determines appropriate. Within Commerce, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) serves as the committee chair. The committee coordinates through sharing information about members' activities to address marine debris, but GAO found that NOAA has not established a process for determining committee membership for agencies not specifically designated in the act. As a result, such agencies may not be included in the biennial reports required by the act which discuss committee members' marine debris activities. NOAA officials said they plan to develop a membership process but have not established a time frame to do so. By establishing a time frame, the committee can more fully benefit from capturing all members' activities.

The committee's biennial reports provide information on members' activities such as education and cleanup, but they do not contain some information required by the Marine Debris Act. Specifically, the reports do not include (1) an analysis of the effectiveness of the committee's recommendations and strategies to address marine debris and (2) recommendations for priority funding needs. Our past work has shown that collaborative entities can better demonstrate progress if they develop a way to monitor and report the results of their collective efforts and identify and leverage resources. By doing so, the committee would be in a better position to know the extent to which it is effectively addressing marine debris and provide Congress with required information about priority funding needs.

Marine debris washed ashore on a beach



Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. | GAO-19-653

Experts suggested a range of actions—from research to cleanup—the federal government could take to most effectively address marine debris. They stressed that there is not one solution to the growing problem (see figure). Committee officials noted factors to consider, such as cost, when evaluating these actions.