



441 G St. N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

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July 31, 2026

The Honorable Jared Huffman
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources
House of Representatives

Federal Land and Water Management: Lessons Learned from Implementing Federal-Tribal Shared Decision-Making Agreements

Dear Ranking Member Huffman:

Federal agencies manage public lands and waters, including national forests and parks, that are tribal ancestral territories and have special importance to Tribes.¹ The Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, and the Interior, and their subcomponent agencies, collaborate with Tribes to fulfill their missions and their unique federal trust and treaty responsibilities.² For example, various federal natural resource management agencies have entered into “shared decision-making” agreements under which Tribes provide substantive input on federal natural and cultural resource management decisions over many years. Such agreements have covered a range of tribal involvement. For example, Tribes help federal agencies develop and implement resource management plans, administer all or parts of national monument operations, and design and implement wildfire risk reduction activities.

In January 2026, we reported on factors that affected agency and tribal efforts to develop shared decision-making agreements.³ In light of information included in our report, you asked us to describe any lessons that federal agencies and Tribes learned while implementing shared decision-making agreements. To do so, we reviewed information we collected in interviews with the parties to the shared decision-making agreements discussed in our previous report.⁴ We analyzed statements related to implementing their agreements and identified several lessons learned. We assessed details regarding the parties’ experiences implementing these

¹As of June 2026, there were 575 federally recognized Tribes in the contiguous U.S. and Alaska, which we refer to as Tribes in this report. 91 Fed. Reg. 4102 (Jan. 30, 2026). The federal government recognizes these Tribes as distinct, independent political entities that possess certain powers of self-governance and that maintain government-to-government relations with the United States.

²These subcomponents include the U.S. Forest Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service.

³GAO, *Federal Land and Water Management: Additional Actions Would Strengthen Agreements with Tribes*, [GAO-26-106626](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 28, 2026).

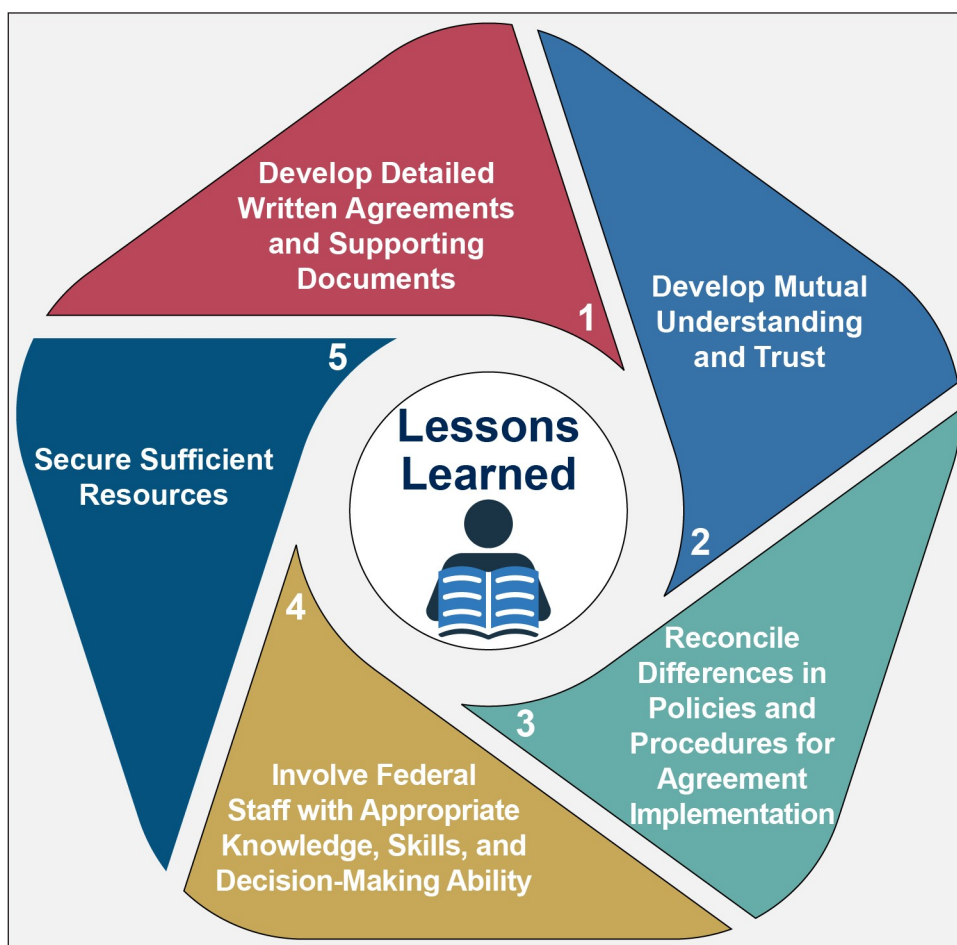
⁴In our January 2026 report, we selected five shared decision-making agreements to review in depth. Four of these agreements included federal and tribal parties, and one agreement included federal and Native Hawaiian community parties. To obtain perspectives beyond our selected agreements, we interviewed an additional 10 Tribes and one Alaska Native Corporation who were also parties to shared decision-making agreements. We reviewed content from these interviews for this report and refer to that input collectively as tribal input.

agreements. We also identified key questions related to each lesson learned that would be useful for federal agencies and Tribes to consider when implementing such agreements.⁵

We conducted this performance audit from February 2026 to July 2026 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

In summary, we identified five lessons learned from the implementation of shared decision-making agreements between federal agencies and Tribes (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: Lessons Federal Agency and Tribal Officials Learned from Implementing Shared Decision-Making Agreements



Source: GAO. | GAO-26-108965

⁵We are presenting these lessons at a high level and they do not reflect all the nuances described by parties to the agreements. In addition, we categorized these lessons for ease of presentation, but some of the information in one lesson may be applicable to the other lessons in this report. The lessons may also be relevant for agencies and Tribes in the process of developing their agreements.

Accessible Text for Figure 1: Lessons Federal Agency and Tribal Officials Learned from Implementing Shared Decision-Making Agreements

Lesson Learned

1. Develop Detailed Written Agreements and Supporting Documents
2. Develop Mutual Understanding and Trust
3. Reconcile Differences in Policies and Procedures for Agreement Implementation
4. Involve Federal Staff with Appropriate Knowledge, Skills, and Decision-Making Ability
5. Secure Sufficient Resources

Source: GAO. | GAO-26-108985

Agency Comments

We provided a copy of this report to Interior, Commerce, and the Forest Service through Agriculture for review and comment. Interior's National Park Service and Agriculture's Forest Service provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. Commerce did not provide comments on our report.

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We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees; the secretaries of Agriculture, Commerce, and the Interior; relevant Tribes; and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact Anna Maria Ortiz, Director, at OrtizA@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Media Relations may be found on the last page of this report. In addition, Leslie Kaas Pollock (Assistant Director), Keesha Luebke (Analyst-in-Charge), Adrian Apodaca, Casey L. Brown, John Delicath, Jack Granberg, Serena Lo, and Jeanette Soares contributed to this report.

Sincerely,

//SIGNED//

Anna Maria Ortiz
Director, Natural Resources and Environment

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