



Highlights of [GAO-04-918](#), a report to the Honorable Charles E. Grassley, Chairman, Caucus on International Narcotics Control, U.S. Senate

# DRUG CONTROL

## Aviation Program Safety Concerns in Colombia Are Being Addressed, but State's Planning and Budgeting Process Can Be Improved

### Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of State supports foreign governments' efforts to eradicate illicit drug crops. In recent years, State's Office of Aviation has maintained aircraft and provided support for the aerial eradication program of the Colombian National Police. However, eradication aircraft are often shot at from the ground requiring helicopter gunships and a search and rescue helicopter to accompany each mission. In 2003, the Office of Aviation fumigated more than 132,000 hectares of coca, a record amount. GAO examined (1) how the threat to the spray planes has changed since 2001, (2) what actions State has taken to address any operational safety concerns, and (3) what resources State provided for the expanding program during fiscal years 2001-04 and how it planned and budgeted for the program's growth.

### What GAO Recommends

To help ensure that the aerial eradication program in Colombia and other State aviation programs have the resources needed, GAO is recommending that the Secretary of State develop a strategic planning and budgeting process that accounts for all of the Office of Aviation's program requirements. In commenting on a draft of this report, State agreed that a more comprehensive long-term planning and budgeting process is needed and has taken some initial steps to this end.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-918](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-918).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4268 or FordJ@gao.gov.

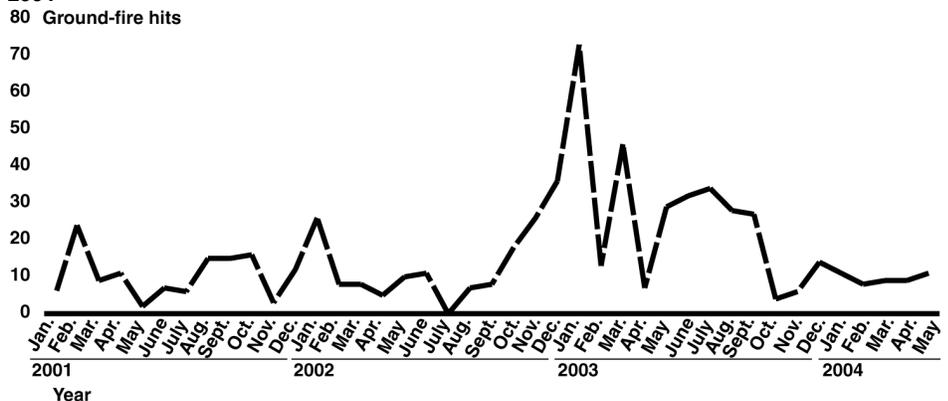
### What GAO Found

In 2001 and most of 2002, the number of ground-fire hits on spray aircraft averaged fewer than 10 per month. But in late 2002 and during 2003, the number of hits increased—peaking at 73 in January 2003 and averaging more than 26 per month—and, in 2003, two spray aircraft crashed and two were forced to land because of ground fire. Moreover, the number of flying hours for spray aircraft more than doubled—from about 5,450 hours in 2001 to over 11,300 hours in 2003. In general, this meant the aircraft were exposed more frequently to the threat of ground fire, although other factors came into play.

In response to the increased number of ground-fire hits, the Colombian National Police began providing two or three helicopter gunships for each eradication mission; this was in addition to the two Office of Aviation gunships that already accompanied every mission. Also, since January 2003, State has taken several actions to help reduce exposure to the threat of ground fire by making greater use of information about armed insurgents' proximity to spray targets.

Since fiscal year 2001, State has significantly increased resources for the aerial eradication program in Colombia. Funding for the program doubled from about \$49 million in fiscal year 2001 to \$100 million for fiscal year 2003. In addition, from fiscal year 2001 to May 2004, personnel in Colombia who were directly involved with the program increased from 179 to 298, and the number of aerial eradication aircraft increased from 22 to 35. However, State does not prepare budgets that address all of the Office of Aviation's program requirements. Consequently, State often moves funds from one program to another, which may adversely affect those programs. In addition, State does not plan for the long-term costs of the aerial eradication program, such as aircraft replacement. As a result, State has postponed requesting funds for new aircraft.

**Number of Ground-Fire Hits Incurred by Spray Aircraft per Month, January 2001 through May 2004**



Sources: State (data), GAO (analysis).