



Highlights of [GAO-05-353T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, Committee on Resources, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Over the past two decades, the number of acres burned by wildland fires has surged, often threatening human lives, property, and ecosystems. Past management practices, including a concerted federal policy in the 20th century of suppressing fires to protect communities and ecosystem resources, unintentionally resulted in steady accumulation of dense vegetation that fuels large, intense, wildland fires. While such fires are normal in some ecosystems, in others they can cause catastrophic damage to resources as well as to communities near wildlands known as the wildland-urban interface.

GAO was asked to identify the (1) progress the federal government has made in responding to wildland fire threats and (2) challenges it will need to address within the next 5 years. This testimony is based primarily on GAO's report *Wildland Fire Management: Important Progress Has Been Made, but Challenges Remain to Completing a Cohesive Strategy* (GAO-05-147), released on February 14, 2005.

What GAO Recommends

In its report and this testimony, GAO recommends that the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior provide the Congress with a plan outlining the critical steps and time frames for completing a cohesive strategy that identifies the options and funding needed to address wildland fire problems.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-353T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

Forest Service and Interior Need to Specify Steps and a Schedule for Identifying Long-Term Options and Their Costs

What GAO Found

Over the last 5 years, the Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture and land management agencies in the Department of the Interior, working with the Congress, have made important progress in responding to wildland fires. The agencies have adopted various national strategy documents addressing the need to reduce wildland fire risks; established a priority for protecting communities in the wildland-urban interface; and increased efforts and amounts of funding committed to addressing wildland fire problems, including preparedness, suppression, and fuel reduction on federal lands. In addition, the agencies have begun improving their data and research on wildland fire problems, made progress in developing long-needed fire management plans that identify actions for effectively addressing wildland fire threats at the local level, and improved federal interagency coordination and collaboration with nonfederal partners. The agencies also have strengthened overall accountability for their investments in wildland fire activities by establishing improved performance measures and a framework for monitoring results.

While the agencies have adopted various strategy documents to address the nation's wildland fire problems, none of these documents constitutes a cohesive strategy that explicitly identifies the long-term options and related funding needed to reduce fuels in national forests and rangelands and to respond to wildland fire threats. Both the agencies and the Congress need a comprehensive assessment of the fuel reduction options and related funding needs to determine the most effective and affordable long-term approach for addressing wildland fire problems. Completing a cohesive strategy that identifies long-term options and needed funding will require finishing several efforts now under way, each with its own challenges. The agencies will need to finish planned improvements in a key data and modeling system—LANDFIRE—to more precisely identify the extent and location of wildland fire threats and to better target fuel reduction efforts. In implementing LANDFIRE, the agencies will need more consistent approaches to assessing wildland fire risks, more integrated information systems, and better understanding of the role of climate in wildland fire. In addition, local fire management plans will need to be updated with data from LANDFIRE and from emerging agency research on more cost-effective approaches to reducing fuels. Completing a new system designed to identify the most cost-effective means for allocating fire management budget resources—Fire Program Analysis—may help to better identify long-term options and related funding needs. Without completing these tasks, the agencies will have difficulty determining the extent and location of wildland fire threats, targeting and coordinating their efforts and resources, and resolving wildland fire problems in the most timely and cost-effective manner over the long term.

A November 2004 report of the Western Governors' Association also called for completing a cohesive federal strategy to address wildland fire problems.