



Highlights of [GAO-07-35](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Environment and Public Works, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Authorization for several conservation programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) expires in 2007, raising questions about how these programs may be modified, including how they can better support conservation of threatened and endangered species. Private landowners receive funding under these programs to implement conservation projects directed at several resource concerns, including threatened and endangered species. In this report, GAO discusses (1) stakeholder views on the incentives and disincentives to participating in USDA programs for the benefit of threatened and endangered species and their suggestions for addressing identified disincentives and (2) coordination efforts by USDA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to benefit threatened and endangered species. In performing this work, GAO conducted telephone surveys with a nonprobability sample of over 150 federal and nonfederal officials and landowners.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that USDA and FWS include mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on coordination efforts in the final version of the agencies' memorandum of understanding. USDA and the Department of the Interior commented that they generally concurred with the findings and recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-35.

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

USDA CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

Stakeholder Views on Participation and Coordination to Benefit Threatened and Endangered Species and Their Habitats

What GAO Found

As might be expected, survey respondents most frequently identified receiving payments as the primary incentive for landowners to participate in USDA conservation programs for the benefit of threatened and endangered species or their habitats. The other most frequently identified incentives were program evaluation criteria that give projects directly addressing threatened or endangered species greater chances of being funded by USDA and landowners' personal interest in conservation. Relatedly, limited funding for programs overall and for the amount available to individual landowners was the most frequently identified disincentive to participation in USDA's programs. Fears about federal government regulations, paperwork requirements, participation and eligibility requirements, and the potential for participation to hinder current or future agricultural production were the next most frequently identified factors limiting participation. Survey respondents most frequently suggested increasing funding, improving education and outreach, streamlining paperwork requirements, and allowing more flexibility in program participation and eligibility requirements as ways to address program disincentives to participating in USDA's programs for the benefit of threatened and endangered species. Respondents indicated that educating and reaching out to more landowners may address a number of identified disincentives, including the fear of government regulations. For some disincentives, however, respondents noted that, while addressing them might entice more people to participate in the programs, it would not necessarily benefit threatened and endangered species. For example, some respondents suggested loosening requirements on the size of buffer strips in riparian areas, but others noted that doing so might harm certain species that are dependent on riparian areas for habitat.

Much of the coordination between USDA and FWS for the benefit of threatened and endangered species occurs at their state and local offices, and is largely driven by the personal motivation of the staff involved. The types of coordination efforts that occur include sharing technical and financial assistance for implementing conservation projects, simplifying regulatory compliance procedures, assisting with special conservation projects, and participating on agency advisory groups. Agency officials noted that successful coordination is largely driven by individuals who have a strong commitment to coordinate, good interpersonal skills, and a willingness to work with others. Officials also recognized, however, that the quality of working relationships and the frequency of coordination between USDA and FWS staff varies considerably by location. To help improve working relationships and coordination, USDA and FWS have developed a draft memorandum of understanding that includes actions such as sharing information on imperiled species and streamlining regulatory processes. While the draft memorandum is a positive step toward strengthening coordination, it does not clearly articulate how these efforts are to be monitored and reported on to ensure that the intended goals are achieved and that coordination is sustained.