



# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-99](#), a report to the Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, Committee on Resources, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Forest Service manages over 192 million acres of land, in part through vegetation management projects such as thinning trees. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires the Forest Service to prepare either an environmental assessment (EA) or an environmental impact statement (EIS) before approving a project that may significantly affect the environment. The agency generally does not need to prepare such environmental analyses, however, if the project involves categories of activities that it previously found to have no significant environmental effects—activities known as a categorical exclusion. As of 2003, the Forest Service had one categorical exclusion—activities to improve timber stands or wildlife habitat. It has since added four new exclusions, but little is known about their use.

GAO was asked to determine, for calendar years 2003 through 2005, (1) how many vegetation management projects the Forest Service approved, including those approved using categorical exclusions; (2) which categorical exclusions the agency used in approving projects; and (3) if field offices are not using categorical exclusions, why. To answer these objectives, GAO surveyed Forest Service officials from all of the 155 national forests.

In commenting on a draft of this report, the Forest Service generally agreed with GAO's findings and observations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-99](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-99).

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](mailto:nazzaror@gao.gov).

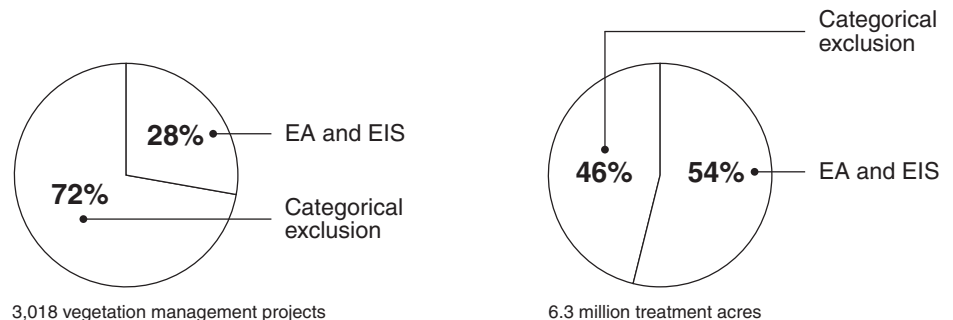
## FOREST SERVICE

# Use of Categorical Exclusions for Vegetation Management Projects, Calendar Years 2003 through 2005

## What GAO Found

For calendar years 2003 through 2005, the Forest Service approved 3,018 vegetation management projects to treat about 6.3 million acres. Of these projects, the Forest Service approved about 28 percent using an EA or EIS to treat about 3.4 million acres, while it approved the remainder using categorical exclusions. Although a majority of the projects were approved using categorical exclusions, these projects accounted for less than half of the total treatment acres. The number and size of projects and types of environmental analysis used during the 3-year period varied, depending upon forest size, ecology, and location, according to Forest Service officials.

### Percentage of Vegetation Management Projects and Treatment Acres Approved Using an EA, EIS, or Categorical Exclusion, Calendar Years 2003 through 2005



Source: GAO.

Of nearly 2,200 vegetation management projects approved using categorical exclusions, the Forest Service approved half of them using the categorical exclusion for improving timber stands or wildlife habitat. In approving the remaining projects, the agency primarily used the categorical exclusion for reducing hazardous fuels, followed by those for salvaging dead or dying trees, conducting limited harvests of live trees, and removing trees to control the spread of insects or disease. The projects approved using the categorical exclusion to improve timber stands or wildlife habitat accounted for about 2.4 million of the 2.9 million acres to be treated under projects approved using categorical exclusions.

About 11 percent of the Forest Service's 509 field offices had not used any of the five vegetation management categorical exclusions during the 3-year period. The reasons why they had not used specific categorical exclusions varied by office and categorical exclusion. For example, about 91 percent of the field offices had not used the categorical exclusion for the removal of trees to control the spread of insects or disease primarily because they did not have a sufficient number of insect- or disease-infested trees. Similarly, 32 percent of the field offices had not used the categorical exclusion to improve timber stands or wildlife habitat, primarily because no projects of this type had been proposed during the 3-year period.