



Highlights of [GAO-08-262](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests, Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

Conflict over the use of our nation's natural resources, along with increased ecological problems, has led land managers to seek cooperative means to resolve natural resource conflicts and problems. Collaborative resource management is one such approach that communities began using in the 1980s and 1990s. A 2004 Executive Order on Cooperative Conservation encourages such efforts.

GAO was asked to determine (1) experts' views on collaborative resource management, (2) how selected collaborative efforts have addressed conflicts and improved resources, and (3) challenges that agencies face as they participate in such efforts and how the Cooperative Conservation initiative has addressed them. GAO reviewed experts' journal articles, studied seven collaborative groups, and interviewed group members and federal and other public officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that CEQ and the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture take several actions to develop a long-term plan, guidance, and tools that could enhance their management and support of collaborative efforts.

GAO provided a draft report for comment to CEQ, Interior, and Agriculture. Interior and Agriculture generally concurred with the conclusions and recommendations. CEQ did not provide comments.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-262](#). For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or [nazzaror@gao.gov](mailto:nazzaror@gao.gov).

# NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

## Opportunities Exist to Enhance Federal Participation in Collaborative Efforts to Reduce Conflicts and Improve Natural Resource Conditions

### What GAO Found

Experts generally view collaborative resource management that involves public and private stakeholders in natural resource decisions as an effective approach for managing natural resources. Several benefits can result from using collaborative resource management, including reduced conflict and litigation and improved natural resource conditions, according to the experts. A number of collaborative practices, such as seeking inclusive representation, establishing leadership, and identifying a common goal among the participants have been central to successful collaborative management efforts. The success of these groups is often judged by whether they increase participation and cooperation or improve natural resource conditions. Many experts also note that there are limitations to the approach, such as the time and resources it takes to bring people together to work on a problem and reach a decision.

Most of the seven collaborative resource management efforts GAO studied in several states across the country were successful in achieving participation and cooperation among their members and improving natural resource conditions. In six of the cases, those involved were able to reduce or avoid the kinds of conflicts that can arise when dealing with contentious natural resource problems. All the efforts, particularly those that effectively reduced or avoided conflict, used at least several of the collaborative practices described by the experts. For example, one effort obtained broad community representation and successfully identified a common goal of using fire, after decades of suppression, to restore the health of a large grasslands area surrounding the community. Also, members of almost all the efforts studied said they have been able to achieve many of their goals for sustaining or improving the condition of specific natural resources. However, for most of these efforts no data were collected on a broad scale to show the effect of their work on overall resource conditions across a large area or landscape.

Federal land and resource management agencies—the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service, and the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service—face key challenges to participating in collaborative resource management efforts, according to the experts, federal officials, and participants in the efforts GAO studied. For example, the agencies face challenges in determining whether to participate in a collaborative effort, measuring participation and monitoring results, and sharing agency and group experiences. As a part of the interagency Cooperative Conservation initiative led by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), the federal government has made progress in addressing these challenges. Yet, additional opportunities exist to develop and disseminate tools, examples, and guidance that further address the challenges, as well as to better structure and direct the initiative to achieve the vision of Cooperative Conservation, which involves a number of actions by multiple agencies over the long term. Failure to pursue such opportunities and to create a long-term plan to achieve the vision may limit the effectiveness of the federal government's initiative and collaborative efforts.