

Why GAO Did This Study

Four federal agencies—the Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service in the Department of the Interior—are responsible for managing federal lands, enforcing federal laws governing the lands and their resources, and ensuring visitor safety. Illegal activities occurring on these lands have raised concerns that the four agencies are becoming less able to protect our natural and cultural resources and ensure public safety.

GAO examined (1) the types of illegal activities occurring on federal lands and the effects of those activities on natural and cultural resources, the public, and agency employees; (2) how the agencies have used their law enforcement resources to respond to these illegal activities; and (3) how the agencies determine their law enforcement resource needs and distribute these resources. GAO reviewed agency documents, interviewed agency officials, and visited or contacted 26 selected agency units.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the agencies adopt a risk management approach to systematically assess and address threats and vulnerabilities presented by illegal activities on federal lands. In commenting on a draft of this report, the Forest Service and Interior concurred with GAO's recommendation.

FEDERAL LANDS

Adopting a Formal, Risk-Based Approach Could Help Land Management Agencies Better Manage Their Law Enforcement Resources

What GAO Found

A wide variety of illegal activities occurs on federal lands, damaging natural and cultural resources and threatening the safety of the public and agency employees. These activities can range from traffic violations to theft of natural and cultural resources to violent crimes. The frequency with which these illegal activities occur is unknown, as agency data do not fully capture the occurrence of such activities; similarly, the extent of resource damage and threats to public and agency employee safety is also unknown. These activities can have overlapping effects on natural, cultural, and historical resources; public access and safety; and the safety of agency employees. For example, illegal hunting results in the loss of wildlife and may also reduce opportunities for legal hunting. Also, cultivation of marijuana not only increases the availability of illegal drugs but fouls ecosystems and can endanger public and agency employee safety. And theft or vandalism of archaeological and paleontological resources can result in the loss or destruction of irreplaceable artifacts, diminishing sites for future visitors and depriving scientists of important sources of knowledge.

In response to illegal activities occurring on federal lands, agencies have taken a number of actions. For example, three of the four agencies have increased their number of permanent law enforcement officers in recent years. The Bureau of Land Management increased its number of law enforcement officers by about 40 percent since fiscal year 2000, the Forest Service by almost 18 percent during the same period, and the Fish and Wildlife Service by about 26 percent since fiscal year 2006. The agencies have also directed officers to respond specifically to marijuana cultivation and illegal border activities, assigned officers temporarily to areas needing a greater law enforcement presence during certain events and law enforcement operations, and increased the training required for new officers.

Although land management agencies consider varied information on the occurrence and effects of illegal activities on federal lands, the agencies do not systematically assess the risks posed by such activities when determining their needs for resources and where to distribute them. While available information helps the agencies to identify many of the risks that illegal activities pose to natural and cultural resources, the public, and agency employees, limitations in this information do not allow officials to fully assess either the magnitude of those risks or the likelihood of their occurrence. As a result, the agencies cannot systematically assess the relative risks faced by the hundreds of individual land management units across the country when making decisions about needed law enforcement resources and how to distribute those resources. Without systematic approaches to assess the risks they face, the agencies may have limited assurance that they are allocating scarce resources in a manner that effectively addresses the risk of illegal activities on our nation's federal lands.