

Why GAO Did This Study

Congress passed the Oil Pollution Act in 1990 (OPA). Among other things, OPA established the Interagency Coordinating Committee on Oil Pollution Research (interagency committee) to coordinate an oil pollution research program among federal agencies, including developing a plan, having the National Academy of Sciences review that plan, and reporting to Congress on the interagency committee's efforts biennially. The 2010 *Deepwater Horizon* explosion and fire led to the largest oil spill in U.S. history, raising new concerns about the effects of oil spills.

GAO was asked to assess the extent to which the interagency committee has facilitated the coordination of federal agencies' oil pollution research. (The Chairman, Subcommittee on Energy and Environment, House Committee on Science and Technology, now retired; and Representative Woolsey initiated this request.) In part, GAO analyzed committee documents and biennial reports and interviewed agency officials and nonfederal research entities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that the interagency committee coordinate efforts to evaluate the contributions of completed research and provide, in its 2012 biennial report to Congress, an update of its efforts to revise its research plan. The Department of Homeland Security concurred with our recommendations.

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FEDERAL OIL AND GAS

Interagency Committee Needs to Better Coordinate Research on Oil Pollution Prevention and Response

What GAO Found

Federal agencies have conducted at least 144 research projects on oil pollution since 2003, but the interagency committee has played a limited role in coordinating this research, according to GAO's analysis of interagency committee reports and documents. For example, agencies conducted research on identifying the toxicity of nonpetroleum oils recovering oil from the sea floor. The interagency committee issued a research plan mandated by OPA in 1997 that set research priorities. This plan, however, did not fully address the recommendations on a draft plan made by the National Research Council, the organization through which the National Academy of Sciences provides most of its advice. For example, the National Research Council noted that the interagency committee should review and evaluate past and present oil pollution research to help guide federal efforts and to avoid duplication. The interagency committee has captured some member agencies' oil pollution research in its biennial reports to Congress, but it has not evaluated whether past research has advanced the 1997 research priorities; instead, the reports summarized projects. Without such an assessment, Congress may be less able to oversee the contributions of federal research to preventing and responding to oil spills. In addition, although OPA did not require that the interagency committee revise its 1997 plan, the National Research Council noted the need to continually reassess a comprehensive research plan. However, the interagency committee has not done so; consequently, the plan does not reflect changes in the oil production and transportation sectors since 1997, such as a significant increase in deepwater drilling. In September 2010, the interagency committee chair began to inventory completed research and categorize research projects according to the 1997 plan's research priorities, and the chair told GAO that the interagency committee will begin to update the 1997 plan in 2011.

OPA also directed the interagency committee to coordinate a comprehensive research program of oil pollution research among the member agencies, in cooperation with external stakeholders, such as industry, research institutions, state governments, and universities. An interagency member official told GAO that the committee helped foster interagency cooperation between two agencies comparing two types of testing to determine the effectiveness of certain chemicals in dispersing oil in sea water; However, more generally, the interagency committee took limited action to foster communication among member agencies between 1997 and 2009, when the chair proposed updating the 1997 plan, according to some member agency officials. Although the interagency committee's meetings have occurred once or twice annually for the past 2 years, they occurred irregularly before then. Additionally, member agencies were not consistently represented in the interagency committee. In October 2010, to better communicate with interagency committee member agencies, among others, the interagency committee launched a Web site, which provides transcripts from its past public meetings and biennial reports to Congress.