

Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government manages about 650 million acres, or 29 percent, of the 2.27 billion acres of U.S. land. Four land management agencies—the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the National Park Service (NPS) in the Department of the Interior (Interior) and the Forest Service, in the Department of Agriculture—manage about 95 percent of these federal acres. Interior’s Bureau of Reclamation (BoR) manages another 1 percent of these acres and focuses on water projects. The five agencies collect certain data to help manage these federal lands.

GAO was asked to review whether the five agencies collect certain federal land and resource data (referred to as data elements), how these data elements are stored, and their potential reliability. GAO included over 100 data elements at each agency in its analysis that can be categorized as information on (1) federal land and the resources the five agencies manage, (2) revenues generated from selected activities on these lands, and (3) federal land subject to selected land use designations. GAO assessed the potential reliability of data elements collected by the agencies generally for fiscal years 1996 through 2009 based on a survey of agency officials and a review of available audits and evaluations. GAO did not collect data for each data element. GAO is making no recommendations in this report.

FEDERAL LAND MANAGEMENT

Availability and Potential Reliability of Selected Data Elements at Five Agencies

What GAO Found

The five agencies varied in the extent to which they collected the over 100 land and resources, revenue, and federal land use designation data elements that GAO queried them about. Specifically, all five agencies collected 4 of the data elements that GAO asked about, which related to total surface acres managed, total acres managed within each state, the number of special use permits generated for filming activities on federal land, and the number of cultural and historic sites listed on the National Registry of Historic Places. In contrast, none of them collected information for 33 data elements that GAO asked them about, such as the percent of total acres under oil, gas, or coal leases that have surface disturbance or where the surface disturbance has been reclaimed, or information on the potential quantities of oil, gas, and coal resources on federal land. Agency officials cited various reasons why the agencies did not collect certain data elements, such as they believed another federal agency collected it, it was inconsistent with the agency’s mission, or they lacked the authority or resources to do so.

Information collected by the five agencies that GAO queried them about was more often stored in a primary agency data system—a centralized electronic data system maintained at an agencywide level—than in other formats. For example, GAO queried each agency about 57 federal land and resources data elements, and while the number of data elements each agency collected varied significantly, ranging from 3 to 22, the majority of the information that was collected was stored in a primary agency data system. Similarly, GAO asked each agency about 35 specific revenue data elements, and again while the number of data elements each agency collected varied significantly, ranging from 6 to 22, the majority of the information that was collected was stored in a primary agency data system. When the agencies collected information but did not store it in a primary agency data system, it was available in other formats such as paper files, land use plans, or other agency documents and files that may have been located in multiple field locations.

GAO assessed the potential reliability of the data elements that the five agencies did collect and determined that less than half of the data elements stored in a primary agency data system were potentially reliable. Generally, data elements were assessed as potentially reliable when information about the completeness and accuracy of a specific data element provided high assurance of its reliability. It is important to note that GAO assessed the potential reliability of these data elements and additional analysis would be needed to determine the reliability of specific data elements for specific purposes.

The Forest Service agreed with the report’s observations and Interior provided technical comments, which were incorporated as appropriate.