

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-363](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Broadband is increasingly seen as an essential communications service, with applications in education, medicine, public safety, and entertainment. However, consumers can experience broadband performance problems. FCC, which has primary responsibility for regulating broadband, has taken steps to measure broadband performance and to require that ISPs give consumers information about the performance of their services.

GAO was asked to review issues related to broadband performance information. This report examines (1) broadband performance information available to consumers and its limitations, if any, and (2) FCC's actions to evaluate its efforts to provide consumers with broadband performance information.

To address these objectives, GAO reviewed FCC proceedings; conducted a literature review; analyzed comments filed with FCC regarding broadband performance information; and interviewed FCC officials and various stakeholders from industry and public interest groups.

What GAO Recommends

FCC should take additional steps to evaluate its efforts to provide consumers with broadband performance information. This should include: (1) conducting or commissioning research on the effectiveness of its efforts and making the results publicly available, and (2) establishing performance goals and measures that allow FCC to monitor and report on these efforts. FCC concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-15-363](#). For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

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BROADBAND PERFORMANCE

Additional Actions Could Help FCC Evaluate Its Efforts to Inform Consumers

What GAO Found

Consumers can access broadband performance information from several sources, including Internet service providers (ISP), online speed tests, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC); however, the information has some limitations. For example:

- **ISP information:** FCC's transparency rule requires ISPs to disclose broadband performance information, but ISPs' disclosures vary, and some stakeholders said that the lack of standardization of disclosures can make it difficult for consumers to compare broadband services. Some ISPs, however, question the need and benefit of standardized disclosures. FCC recently adopted enhancements to the transparency rule, such as specifying what information ISPs must disclose, and FCC is considering potential disclosure formats.
- **Speed tests:** Consumers can use information from these tests to verify their broadband speeds. However, speed tests can be affected by many factors and may not detect congestion affecting a specific website. Thus, it can be difficult for consumers to identify the cause of their broadband performance problems.
- **FCC reports:** Through the Measuring Broadband America (MBA) program, FCC tests ISPs' networks and compares their actual and advertised speeds in an [annual report](#). However, the report is not targeted toward consumers, and stakeholders stated that consumers may not be aware of the report.

FCC has taken steps to evaluate its efforts to provide consumers with broadband performance information, such as its transparency rule and MBA program; however, FCC's ability to evaluate its efforts is limited by a lack of useful performance information and relevant performance goals and measures. For instance, while FCC obtains information about the effectiveness of its efforts from stakeholders' comments and consumers' complaints, FCC has not sought performance information from more objective sources, such as consumer research—as has been done by other government entities. Further, although consumer complaints can provide FCC with valuable insights on topics of interest to the commission, FCC has acknowledged that complaints may not provide a complete picture of consumer's information needs and some industry stakeholders have questioned FCC's reliance on complaints as a basis for making decisions. In addition, although FCC's strategic plan includes strategic objectives related to informing consumers about broadband networks, FCC lacks performance goals and measures to monitor the impact and effectiveness of its efforts to provide consumers with broadband performance information. GAO has previously reported that critical elements of effective performance management include information that is complete and consistent, with performance measures linked to goals. Without such information and measures, FCC cannot be assured that its efforts to provide consumers with broadband performance information are effective and meeting consumers' needs.