

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-667](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

As the nation's largest energy consumer, the federal government spent about \$7 billion in fiscal year 2014 to provide energy to over 275,000 federally owned or leased buildings. Federal law and policies for improving sustainability across the federal government include “green building” provisions—construction and maintenance practices designed to make efficient use of resources and reduce environmental impacts, among other benefits. A March 2015 executive order required CEQ to revise key green building requirements and extended the time frames for implementation in existing buildings. Third-party certification systems are used to assess how well green building elements are incorporated into a building's design and operation.

GAO was asked to review federal green building efforts and agencies' use of third-party certification systems. This report examines (1) federal efforts to support agencies' implementation of key green building requirements, (2) select agencies' use of third-party certification systems, and (3) challenges select agencies face in implementing requirements. GAO reviewed federal requirements; agency policies and guidance; and interviewed officials from agencies with supporting roles and agencies with experience implementing the requirements and using different certification systems. GAO also reviewed documentation and interviewed representatives from third-party certification organizations.

GAO is not making recommendations. CEQ, DOD, DOE, EPA, GSA, OMB, and VA reviewed a draft report and most provided technical comments that GAO incorporated, as appropriate.

View [GAO-15-667](#). For more information, contact Frank Rusco at (202) 512-3841 or [ruscof@gao.gov](mailto:ruscof@gao.gov), Brian J. Lepore at (202) 512-4523 or [leporeb@gao.gov](mailto:leporeb@gao.gov), or David J. Wise at (202) 512-2834 or [wised@gao.gov](mailto:wised@gao.gov).

July 2015

## FEDERAL GREEN BUILDING

### Federal Efforts and Third-Party Certification Help Agencies Implement Key Requirements, but Challenges Remain

#### What GAO Found

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), Department of Energy (DOE), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), General Services Administration (GSA), and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) provide guidance, oversight, training, and other support to agencies implementing key federal green building requirements. For example, DOE offers training on measuring and reporting on the implementation of requirements, among other things. Also, EPA's Energy Star Portfolio Manager is a web-based tool agencies and other entities can use to measure and track buildings' energy and water use. According to officials, some federal support efforts will need to be updated when the revised requirements are issued, as called for in the March 2015 executive order.

All of the select agencies GAO reviewed—Department of Defense (DOD), DOE, EPA, GSA, and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)—use third-party certification systems to help implement key federal green building requirements for new construction and major renovation projects. While certification does not ensure that a building meets all requirements, agencies have developed tools to ensure that any remaining federal requirements are implemented at their buildings, and officials noted that there are additional benefits to using these systems. For example, officials stated that certification provides a well-established framework for documenting and ensuring compliance; serves as a tool to communicate with contractors and the public; and reduces the need for additional staff to verify that a building meets requirements. Of the select agencies GAO reviewed, none require third-party certification for existing buildings, but three have developed their own systems for assessing the implementation of key requirements for existing buildings. Several agencies stated that they are not certain how they will use third-party certification systems in the future after the revisions to key green building requirements are issued. For example, EPA and VA officials stated that they may reevaluate their requirement to certify specific projects after the revised green building requirements are issued.

Regardless of whether they use certification systems, the agencies GAO reviewed identified a variety of challenges in implementing current green building requirements, including challenges related to their building inventories, missions, and the criteria for evaluating compliance. For example, DOD officials said that the sheer number of buildings in their inventory proves challenging. In addition, according to officials from several agencies, their building inventories include certain building types, such as laboratories, hospitals, and industrial buildings for which some requirements are difficult to implement. VA cited mission concerns, including new safety requirements and extended hours to address patient backlogs, as a challenge to implementing energy and water conservation requirements. Also, some agency officials said that the criteria for evaluating compliance with the requirements can be a disincentive to implementing some requirements because no credit is received unless all of the requirements are implemented. Forthcoming revisions to key green building requirements may address some of these challenges. CEQ officials said that they were aware of the challenges and want to ensure that they are not providing any disincentives for agencies to meet some of the requirements even if they cannot meet all.