

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-772](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Wildland fire plays an important ecological role in maintaining healthy ecosystems. Over the past century, however, various land management practices, including fire suppression, have disrupted the normal frequency of fires and have contributed to larger and more severe wildland fires. Wildland fires cost billions to fight each year, result in loss of life, and cause damage to homes and infrastructure. In fiscal years 2009 through 2014, the five federal wildland fire agencies obligated a total of \$8.3 billion to suppress wildland fires.

GAO was asked to review multiple aspects of federal wildland fire management across the five federal wildland fire management agencies. This report examines (1) key changes the federal wildland fire agencies have made in their approach to wildland fire management since 2009, (2) how the agencies assess the effectiveness of their wildland fire management programs, and (3) how the agencies determine the distribution of their wildland fire management resources. GAO reviewed laws, policies, and guidance related to wildland fire management; reviewed agency performance measures; analyzed obligation data for fiscal years 2004 through 2014; and interviewed officials from the five agencies, as well as Interior's Office of Wildland Fire.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the agencies develop specific criteria for selecting wildland fires for review and conducting the reviews, and revise agency policies accordingly. The agencies generally agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations.

View [GAO-15-772](#). For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell at (202) 512-3841 or fennella@gao.gov.

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WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

Agencies Have Made Several Key Changes but Could Benefit from More Information about Effectiveness

What GAO Found

Since 2009, the five federal agencies responsible for wildland fire management—the Forest Service within the Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service in the Department of the Interior—have made several key changes in their approach to wildland fire management. One key change was the issuance of agency guidance in 2009 that provided managers with more flexibility in responding to wildland fires. This change allowed managers to consider different options for response given land management objectives and the risk posed by the fire. The agencies also worked with nonfederal partners to develop a strategy aimed at coordinating wildland fire management activities around common goals. The extent to which the agencies' steps have resulted in on-the-ground changes varied across agencies and regions, however, and officials identified factors, such as proximity to populated areas, that may limit their implementation of some changes.

The agencies assess the effectiveness of their wildland fire management programs in several ways, including through performance measures and reviews of specific wildland fires. The agencies are developing new performance measures, in part to help better assess the results of their current emphasis on risk-based management, according to agency officials. However, the agencies have not consistently followed agency policy regarding fire reviews, which calls for reviews of all fires resulting in federal suppression expenditures of \$10 million or more, nor have they used specific criteria for the reviews they have conducted. GAO has previously found that it is important for agencies to collect performance information to inform key management decisions and to identify problems and take corrective actions. Forest Service and Interior officials said focusing only on suppression costs does not allow them to identify the most useful fires for review, and they told GAO they are working to improve their criteria for selecting fires to review and conducting these reviews. Forest Service officials did not indicate a time frame for their efforts, and while they provided a draft update of their policy manual, it did not contain specific criteria. Interior officials told GAO they expect to develop criteria by the end of 2015, but did not provide information about how they planned to develop such criteria or the factors they would consider. By developing specific criteria for selecting fires to review and conducting reviews, and making commensurate changes to agency policies, the agencies may enhance their ability to help ensure that their fire reviews provide useful information about the effectiveness of their wildland fire activities.

The Forest Service and Interior determine the distribution of fire management resources for three primary wildland fire activities of suppression, preparedness, and fuel reduction in part on the basis of historical funding amounts. For suppression, the Forest Service and Interior manage suppression funding as needed for responding to wildland fires, estimating required resources using the average of the previous 10 years of suppression obligations. For preparedness and fuel reduction, the Forest Service and Interior distribute resources based primarily on historical amounts. Both are working to distribute resources in ways that better reflect current conditions, including developing new systems that they stated they plan to begin using in fiscal year 2016.