

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-165](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Natural Resources, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Mining Law of 1872 encouraged development of the West by opening up federal land to exploration, extraction, and development of hardrock minerals such as gold, silver, and copper. Because mining creates the potential for serious health, safety, and environmental hazards, BLM and the Forest Service have processes for reviewing mine plans submitted by operators to help prevent and mitigate these hazards. A mine plan details the proposed mine's operations, such as the methods for mining and reclaiming the site once operations have concluded.

GAO was asked to assess the mine plan review process. This report examines (1) the number of mine plans BLM and the Forest Service approved from fiscal years 2010 through 2014, among other things, and (2) challenges that have affected the length of time for BLM and the Forest Service to complete the review process, as well as actions these agencies have taken to address these challenges. GAO obtained and analyzed mine plan review data from fiscal years 2010 through 2014, and interviewed agency officials in 23 offices, representing the 12 western states where hardrock mining occurs. The results are not generalizable to all locations conducting mine plan reviews.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that the agencies take actions to improve the quality of mine plan submissions and seek additional recovery of the costs associated with conducting mine plan reviews. The agencies generally concurred with these recommendations.

View [GAO-16-165](#). For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell, (202) 512-3841 or fennella@gao.gov.

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HARDROCK MINING

BLM and Forest Service Have Taken Some Actions to Expedite the Mine Plan Review Process but Could Do More

What GAO Found

From fiscal years 2010 through 2014, the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service approved 68 mine plans of operation. The length of time it took the agencies to approve the mine plans ranged from about 1 month to over 11 years, and averaged approximately 2 years. Of the 68 approved mine plans, 13 had not begun operations as of November 2015. Agency officials attribute this to difficulties mine operators may face, such as obtaining other required federal and state permits.

A Hardrock Gold Mine on BLM-Managed Land in Nevada



Source: GAO. | GAO-16-165

BLM and Forest Service officials GAO interviewed said they experienced 13 key challenges that affected the length of time to review hardrock mine plans. The two most frequently cited were (1) the low quality of information operators provided in their mine plans and (2) the agencies' limited allocation of resources for their hardrock mining programs. To address the low quality of information in mine plans, some BLM and Forest Service officials held pre-mine plan submittal meetings with operators. However, officials do not always do so because BLM does not have specific guidance on how to implement these meetings, and Forest Service does not have any guidance instructing them to do so. Federal standards for internal control state that management should ensure there are adequate means of communicating with, and obtaining information from, external stakeholders that may have a significant impact on the agency achieving its goals. Without taking further actions to improve the quality of mine plan submissions, BLM and the Forest Service may be missing opportunities to help expedite the review process. To address the limited allocation of resources, BLM and Forest Service officials are leveraging existing resources by collaborating with other agencies, among other actions, but neither agency has fully used its authority to collect fees for conducting mine plan reviews as authorized by law. In addition, Forest Service is not authorized to retain these fees, as BLM is, but has not proposed the legislative changes that would allow it to retain fees, as is suggested by Office of Management and Budget guidance. BLM officials said the agency has not prioritized cost recovery for certain types of environmental analyses, and Forest Service officials were unaware of these authorities. By not using these authorities, BLM and Forest Service may be missing opportunities to expedite the mine plan review process.