

Highlights of GAO-19-643, a report to the Chairman, Committee on Natural Resources, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

A 2014 government report predicted that the rate of violent domestic extremist incidents would increase. In recent years, some high-profile incidents have occurred on federal lands, such as the armed occupation of a FWS wildlife refuge in 2016. Federal land management agencies manage nearly 700 million acres of federal lands and have law enforcement divisions that protect their employees and secure their facilities.

GAO was asked to review how land management agencies protect their employees and secure their facilities. For the four federal land management agencies, this report examines, among other things, (1) what is known about the number of threats and assaults against their employees and (2) the extent to which agencies met federal facility security assessment requirements. GAO analyzed available government data on threats and assaults; examined agencies' policies, procedures, and documentation on facility security assessments; compared the agencies' methodologies against ISC requirements; and interviewed land management agency, ISC, and FBI officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations: that BLM, the Forest Service, and the Park Service develop a plan for completing facility security assessments and that BLM, FWS, and the Park Service take action to ensure their facility security assessment methodologies comply with ISC requirements. The agencies generally concurred with the recommendations.

View GAO-19-643. For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell at (202) 512-3841 or FennellA@gao.gov.

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FEDERAL LAND MANAGEMENT AGENCIES

Additional Actions Needed to Address Facility Security Assessment Requirements

What GAO Found

Data from the four federal land management agencies—the Forest Service within the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Fish and Wildlife (FWS), and National Park Service (Park Service) within the Department of the Interior—showed a range of threats and assaults against agency employees in fiscal years 2013 through 2017. For example, incidents ranged from telephone threats to attempted murder against federal land management employees. However, the number of actual threats and assaults is unclear and may be higher than what is captured in available data for various reasons. For example, employees may not always report threats because they consider them a part of the job. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) data for fiscal years 2013 through 2017 also showed that the FBI initiated under 100 domestic terrorism investigations into potential threats against federal land management agencies. The majority of these investigations involved BLM and individuals motivated by anti-government ideologies.

The four federal land management agencies have completed some but not all of the facility security assessments on their occupied federal facilities as required by the Interagency Security Committee (ISC). Officials at the four agencies said that either they do not have the resources, expertise, or training to conduct assessments agency-wide. FWS has a plan to complete its assessments, but BLM, the Forest Service, and the Park Service do not. Such a plan could help these agencies address the factors that have affected their ability to complete assessments. The ISC also requires that agencies conduct assessments using a methodology that meets, among other things, two key requirements: (1) consider all of the undesirable events (e.g., arson and vandalism) identified as possible risks to facilities, and (2) assess the threat, vulnerability, and consequence for each of these events. The Forest Service's methodology meets these two requirements and the Park Service's methodology partially meets the requirements, but BLM and FWS have not yet established methodologies for conducting facility security assessments. Without developing a plan for conducting all of the remaining facility security assessments and using a methodology that complies with ISC requirements, agencies may not identify the risks their facilities face or identify the countermeasures—such as security cameras or security gates—they could implement to mitigate those risks.



Security gate installed at the Fish and Wildlife Service's Malheur National Wildlife Refuge following an armed occupation in January 2016.

Source: GAO. | GAO-19-643