GAO
Highlights

FEDERAL PROPERTY

Improved Monitoring, Oversight, and Data Would Help Understand Effects of Providing Property to Non-Federal Recipients

Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government owns and manages over a trillion of dollars of property that is not real property, such as vehicles, computers, and office furniture. Federal agencies generally get rid of excess property through GSA's disposal process, which then allows entities such as other federal agencies, to obtain that property if they want. Some agencies have independent authorities that allow them to provide property to non-federal recipients, such as universities, before or during the GSA disposal process.

GAO was asked to review how federal agencies provide property to non-federal recipients. This report examines (1) how selected agencies manage unneeded and excess property provided to non-federal recipients and (2) what is known about benefits, effects, and data on property provided to these recipients. GAO analyzed GSA non-federal recipients' reports from fiscal years 2013 to 2017, the most current available at the start of our review, and selected three agencies—USDA, DOE, and DOL—to obtain variety on the methods used to provide property to non-federal recipients. GAO reviewed relevant processes and interviewed officials from GSA, selected agencies, and non-federal recipients.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations, including one to DOL and two apiece to USDA, DOE, and GSA concerning improving oversight, monitoring, and data quality for property provided to non-federal recipients. All four agencies agreed with the recommendations.

What GAO Found

GAO found the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Department of Energy (DOE), and Department of Labor (DOL) established a process for providing property to non-federal recipients but had limited insight into how these recipients used this property. Officials told GAO that some of the property was disposed of prematurely or not used at all. Such outcomes are inconsistent with agency policy. Whether these instances are widespread or uncommon is unknown due to a lack of consistent monitoring and oversight. For example, DOE officials said they were not monitoring property provided by one of their programs, because they thought the authorization had expired. Without consistent monitoring or oversight, agencies cannot be assured that property is being used as required or achieving intended objectives.

Telescopic Boom Lift Used by a United States Department of Agriculture Non-Federal Recipient

Source: Arizona Board of Regents. | GAO-20-101

Selected agencies identified benefits of providing unneeded and excess property to non-federal recipients, but the larger effect of these efforts is unclear due to a lack of reported reliable data. Agency officials said providing property to these recipients saves costs and enhances their mission. However, other sources, including a General Services Administration (GSA) study, reported that using these authorities has reduced the amount of property that would otherwise be available to federal agencies or other recipients. While data on property provided to non-federal recipients are key to understanding the effects of the program, GAO found the government-wide data on property provided to non-federal recipients were unreliable. For example, GAO found that agencies reported incorrect authorities for transactions and underreported excess property provided to such recipients. GSA's current reporting tool and guidance are unclear on how agencies should report these items, and GSA does not have definite plans on what changes it will make to address these government-wide data issues. Until these changes are made, it will be hard to understand the scope of property provided to non-federal recipients and assess the effects on the federal government's disposal process, such as whether federal agencies and other recipients may be missing opportunities to obtain property.