

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104326](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and other natural disasters can damage watersheds, creating threats to life and property. According to the U.S. Global Change Research Program, extreme weather events in the United States are becoming more frequent and intense, in part due to climate change, which GAO has reported poses a significant fiscal risk to the federal government. USDA's EWP program provides technical and financial assistance to help project sponsors relieve imminent threats to life and property created by natural disasters. Congress appropriated over \$1.3 billion to the EWP program from fiscal years 2015 through 2020.

GAO was asked to review the EWP program. This report (1) describes the process through which USDA provides assistance under the EWP program and (2) examines stakeholder perspectives on the EWP program, including any challenges and opportunities for improvement. GAO reviewed statutes, regulations, program guidance, and other documents. GAO also interviewed USDA officials and sponsors and other stakeholders in six states selected, among other reasons, because they received the most EWP funds from fiscal years 2015 through 2019.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that NRCS, as it develops a project sponsor guide for the EWP program, should ensure that the guide clarifies areas of limited guidance identified by stakeholders. NRCS and the Forest Service concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-22-104326](#). For more information, contact Nathan Anderson at (202) 512-3841 or AndersonN@gao.gov.

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EMERGENCY WATERSHED PROTECTION

Assistance Program Helps Meet Post-Disaster Needs and Could Be Improved with Additional Guidance

What GAO Found

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides assistance to project sponsors (e.g., state, local, or tribal governments) through the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program using a process that includes assessing damage, overseeing implementation of projects, and reimbursing project costs. To be eligible for the EWP program, a project must address damage that poses a threat to life or property (see figure), and the benefits of the project must generally outweigh the costs. NRCS officials said that if a site meets these conditions, the agency generally approves it. If NRCS has insufficient EWP funds, an approved project may be waitlisted until the agency receives additional funds from Congress.

Flood Damage to Homes in Colorado, 2013



Source: Colorado Water Conservation Board. | GAO-22-104326

Sponsors and other stakeholders generally described the EWP program as an important program that helps sponsors respond to disasters, but they also identified challenges, including the clarity of program guidance for sponsors. For example, many stakeholders identified areas where guidance was limited or unclear, including guidance related to the steps and forms needed for sponsors to request assistance. Some said it would be helpful to have such guidance, so potential sponsors can quickly learn key policies and procedures, such as time frames for applying for assistance and project time limits. Some NRCS state offices have developed guides to help sponsors understand program requirements, but NRCS does not have a national sponsor guide for the EWP program. As of October 2021, NRCS officials said that they were in the process of developing a national sponsor guide, which they anticipated issuing in 2022. However, from GAO's review of NRCS documents and discussions with NRCS officials, it is not clear whether the guide will address the challenges identified by stakeholders GAO interviewed. As NRCS continues developing its national sponsor guide, it should ensure that the guide clarifies these areas to help NRCS and sponsors better achieve their objectives of protecting life and property after a natural disaster.