SPECTRUM MANAGEMENT

Improved Planning and Interagency Collaboration Could Strengthen Spectrum Reallocation Efforts

What GAO Found

Spectrum is a natural resource that enables wireless communications and critical government operations, such as shown in the figure below. A key spectrum management activity of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) is to work with other agencies, such as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), to execute spectrum reallocations, so that FCC can auction the spectrum for commercial use. However, GAO found that NTIA lacks a comprehensive planning process for doing so. Reallocating spectrum, which involves transferring spectrum used by the federal government to nonfederal users, is a complex, often lengthy undertaking involving many stakeholders and steps. For reallocations, NTIA typically collects input from those agencies whose use of spectrum would be affected by a proposed reallocation. NTIA may also help agencies evaluate the potential effects that a proposed reallocation could have on the agencies’ spectrum-dependent operations. While NTIA follows some usual steps in conducting reallocations, NTIA lacks plans with objectives and targets, integrated master schedules, and risk assessments. By following these leading practices in program management, NTIA may be able to more effectively implement reallocations.

Examples of Federal and Nonfederal Spectrum Uses

To address potential interference among proposed uses of spectrum, NTIA and FCC employ various coordination mechanisms. For domestic matters, the agencies coordinate through an NTIA-led committee that provides input to FCC’s spectrum proceedings. However, GAO found these mechanisms do not fully reflect leading collaboration practices. For example, while the documents that guide coordination between FCC and NTIA emphasize reaching consensus whenever possible, there are no clearly defined and agreed-upon processes for resolving matters when agencies cannot do so. GAO’s review found that these issues affected the United States’ participation in international conferences regarding the regulation of the global use of spectrum. For example, disputes among the agencies and the inability to reach agreement on U.S. technical contributions challenged the U.S.’s ability to present an agreed-upon basis for decisions or a unified position.