

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105537](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Accidents on interstate natural gas and hazardous liquid pipelines can release large amounts of these products, potentially injuring or killing people and damaging the environment. In 2007, PHMSA launched the Enforcement Transparency website to address concerns about the transparency of its pipeline safety enforcement actions.

The Protecting our Infrastructure of Pipelines and Enhancing Safety Act of 2020 includes a provision for GAO to review information on pipeline enforcement actions that PHMSA makes publicly available on the internet. This report addresses (1) PHMSA's process to record pipeline safety enforcement information, and what information PHMSA makes publicly available, and (2) the extent to which its pipeline enforcement website aligns with key practices for transparently reporting data.

GAO reviewed relevant statutes, regulations, and agency guidance on recording and publishing pipeline safety enforcement information. GAO compared PHMSA's Enforcement Transparency website with leading practices for transparently reporting government data that GAO previously identified, and interviewed PHMSA officials and stakeholders.

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes three recommendations to improve the transparency and usability of PHMSA's Enforcement Transparency website, specifically to provide complete data in more useful formats, to improve matching with other PHMSA datasets, and to optimize the website's search function. DOT concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105537](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth Repko at (202) 512-2384 or repkoe@gao.gov.

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PIPELINE SAFETY

Fully Implementing Key Practices Could Help Improve Transparency of Enforcement Website

What GAO Found

Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) officials inspect pipelines and investigate accidents. These officials can issue a range of enforcement actions if they identify unsafe conditions or non-compliance with laws or regulations. PHMSA records enforcement information in an electronic records system, and uploads documents and related data to its public Enforcement Transparency website. GAO found that this website fully met two of five key practices that GAO identified for transparently reporting open government data and partially met another three. (See figure.) Open data can foster accountability and public trust by providing citizens with information on government activities and their outcomes. PHMSA officials stated that they would like to improve the website for users, but are first focusing on improving the electronic records system. Nevertheless, fully implementing these key practices could assist PHMSA with transparently presenting enforcement information and help users find the information they need.

Key Practices for Transparently Reporting Open Government Data and the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration's (PHMSA) Enforcement Transparency Website

| Key practices | Website characteristics |
|--|---|
|  <p>Engage with users</p> | <p>Met. PHMSA officials discuss the use of the website with users, including pipeline operators and the public, and provide a link on the website for users to submit feedback or questions.</p> |
|  <p>Fully describe the data</p> | <p>Met. PHMSA's website provides labels and descriptions of the enforcement data and tables. Metadata and licensing information for these data are available on a central Department of Transportation website.</p> |
|  <p>Provide free and unrestricted data</p> | <p>Partially met. PHMSA's website and the data it contains are available to the public at no cost. However, PHMSA does not publish complete data on its website. For example, PHMSA's enforcement documents include variables that indicate whether the pipeline involved is interstate or intrastate, but PHMSA does not make these variables available in the enforcement dataset.</p> |
|  <p>Provide data in useful formats</p> | <p>Partially met. PHMSA allows users to view and download disaggregated data on all enforcement activities. However, users are unable to download a bulk dataset of all enforcement activities from 2002 to 2022. Additionally, users cannot easily match records from the enforcement website with records in PHMSA's accident dataset.</p> |
|  <p>Facilitate data discovery for users</p> | <p>Partially met. PHMSA facilitates data discovery by providing users with overviews and definitions of the enforcement information published on the website, and provides national summaries of the data. However, PHMSA does not provide an optimized search tool that allows users to filter by discreet variables, such as the regulation violated.</p> |

Source: GAO analysis of PHMSA website and key practices. | [GAO-23-105537](#)