GAO Highlights

SPECTRUM MANAGEMENT

DOD and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration Should Improve External Collaboration

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A Report to the Chairman, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

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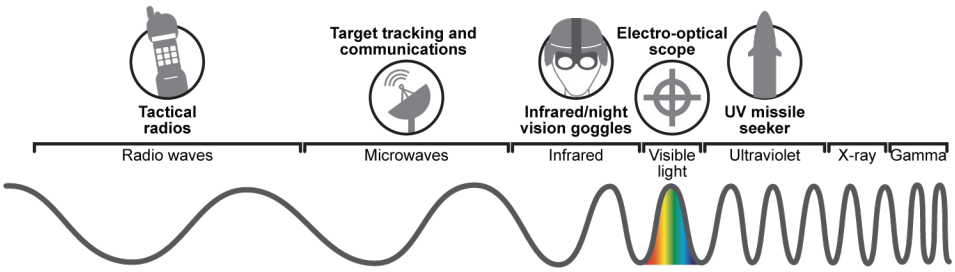
What GAO Found

The electromagnetic spectrum is a critical resource for many uses including national defense and commercial wireless services. Since more than one user operating on the same frequency can disrupt transmissions, the Department of Defense (DOD) must coordinate its spectrum use. It does so with other federal agencies and nonfederal entities, such as private sector companies and other organizations. This coordination occurs through a National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) committee. In doing so, DOD generally follows leading collaboration practices. For instance, DOD policy and practices provide for defined roles, established processes, and regular communication, which are each leading collaboration practices. Agency officials and private-sector stakeholders said DOD secures the frequency assignments it needs while addressing potential interference and other concerns with other users.

Selected Spectrum Uses of the Department of Defense



Source: GAO illustration and analysis based on Department of Defense information. | GAO-26-107873

DOD and NTIA conduct spectrum repurposing studies to determine if continuous portions of the spectrum—called bands—can be designated for different categories of use (e.g., radar, mobile phone networks, GPS, or users [i.e., federal or nonfederal users]). DOD and NTIA followed most collaboration leading practices in conducting two such studies recently but did not consistently provide transparency to stakeholders or establish documented processes for the studies. For a major 2023 study for sharing spectrum bands DOD currently uses for radar, DOD collaborated with federal and nonfederal stakeholders. However, DOD did not clearly communicate to nonfederal stakeholders whether and how their input would be evaluated or used in decision-making. According to some stakeholders, this lack of transparency led to uncertainty about the value of their participation in the study. For a separate 2024 spectrum-sharing report, DOD and NTIA did not develop documented plans or establish formal processes to guide their work. Improved NTIA and DOD transparency, documentation of policies, and clearer expectations for collaboration could help reduce uncertainty and build trust. Considering that spectrum sharing and repurposing collaborations can potentially last years, these changes would also support more informed decision-making by nonfederal stakeholders about whether to invest time and resources in participating. Without addressing these uncertainties, nonfederal stakeholders may decide not to participate in future DOD- and NTIA- led studies, even though their input is valuable in determining how to repurpose spectrum effectively.

Why GAO Did This Study

In recent years, private-sector demand for spectrum has increased, creating debate over whether some DOD frequency assignments could be repurposed for nonfederal use. DOD coordinates with NTIA, which manages federal agencies' spectrum use, in the processes to obtain frequency assignments and study the feasibility of repurposing spectrum.

GAO was asked to review DOD's use of spectrum and its collaboration with NTIA and other stakeholders. Among other objectives, this report evaluates (1) the extent to which DOD's processes for obtaining frequency assignments follow leading practices for collaboration; and (2) the extent to which DOD's and NTIA's processes for developing spectrum repurposing studies follow leading collaboration and information-sharing practices, among other objectives.

GAO reviewed DOD and NTIA documentation and interviewed officials from DOD components, NTIA, and federal and nonfederal stakeholders. GAO also compared DOD and NTIA practices with leading collaboration and other leading management practices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that DOD develop a policy explaining how DOD will evaluate input from stakeholders when collaborating on spectrum repurposing studies and that DOD and NTIA develop policy requiring documented approaches to guide such studies in the future. DOD agreed with its recommendations, and NTIA agreed with its recommendation.