

A report to congressional addressees

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## What GAO Found

As GAO reported in December 2024, the Forest Service did not meet its annual targets for amount of timber sold in fiscal years 2014 through 2023, averaging about 90 percent of its targets during this time frame. During interviews with GAO for this review, agency officials identified factors that limited their ability to attain these targets, including staffing and legal challenges. For example, officials said staff capacity limited their ability to complete work needed to manage timber sales. Officials said staff reductions in 2025 further strained their capacity. The agency's workforce decreased by about 20 percent in response to a February 2025 executive order for large-scale workforce reductions. Given these reductions, officials said increasing timber sales in response to a March 2025 executive order on expanding timber production would be challenging.

### Timber Harvest Operations (left) and a Forest Service Official at the Site of a Timber Sale (right)



Source: Forest Service. | GAO-26-107993

Agency officials and stakeholders identified opportunities to improve the Forest Service's management of timber sales, such as the following:

- **Expanding practices to more effectively use staff and conduct strategic workforce planning.** Officials and several stakeholders said that increasing the use of partners and contractors and newer tools and technologies could help the agency address its staffing challenges. Officials and industry, conservation, and nonfederal government stakeholders also said the Forest Service needs more staff and staff with the right expertise to manage timber sales. The agency has not assessed how recent and ongoing changes to its workforce and organizational structure will affect its capacity. By conducting strategic workforce planning, the Forest Service could better understand how to recruit and retain the critical staff it needs to effectively manage timber sales.
- **Improving communication.** Officials and several stakeholders said that improving the frequency and consistency of communication with stakeholders and the public could improve the Forest Service's management of planned timber sales. For example, an industry stakeholder said the agency could provide more current, comprehensive information on timber sales on its website. By more frequently and consistently communicating information about planned timber sales to stakeholders and the public, the Forest Service could better manage its timber sales.

## Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. Forest Service sells billions of board feet of timber each year as part of its mission to manage the National Forest System for multiple uses and to provide sustained yields of various resources, including timber. Some congressional members, industry and conservation groups, and others have raised concerns, including about the amount of timber sold or negative effects of timber sales on wildlife habitat and recreation.

A congressional committee report includes a provision for GAO to review Forest Service timber harvest levels. GAO was also asked by multiple congressional requesters to review this topic. This report, the second in a two-part series, (1) describes factors Forest Service officials identify as limiting the agency's ability to meet its targets for annual timber sales and (2) examines agency officials' and stakeholders' views on how to improve management of Forest Service timber sales.

GAO reviewed relevant agency documents and data; conducted in-person site visits to seven national forests in three regions, selected based on variation in volume of timber sold and geography; and interviewed officials from Forest Service headquarters, officials from all nine regions, and nonfederal stakeholders, such as industry and conservation groups.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that the Forest Service conduct strategic workforce planning and take steps to improve communication with stakeholders and the public. The Forest Service's audit liaison stated in an email that the agency agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations.