

GAO  
Accountability · Integrity · Reliability

# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-05-373](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Resources, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

In an effort to reduce the risk of wildland fires, many federal land managers—including the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)—are placing greater emphasis on thinning forests and rangelands to help reduce the buildup of potentially hazardous fuels. These thinning efforts generate considerable quantities of woody material, including many smaller trees, limbs, and brush—referred to as woody biomass—that currently have little or no commercial value.

GAO was asked to determine (1) which federal agencies are involved in efforts to promote the use of woody biomass, and actions they are undertaking; (2) how these agencies are coordinating their activities; and (3) what agencies see as obstacles to increasing the use of woody biomass, and the extent to which they are addressing these obstacles.

## What GAO Recommends

To improve the Forest Service's effectiveness in promoting woody biomass utilization, GAO recommends that the Secretary of Agriculture direct the Chief of the Forest Service to appoint an official or organization responsible for overseeing and coordinating the agency's woody biomass activities.

In responding to a draft of this report, USDA concurred with its findings and recommendation, while DOE had no comments. Interior provided no response.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-373](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-373).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or [nazzaror@gao.gov](mailto:nazzaror@gao.gov).

## NATURAL RESOURCES

# Federal Agencies Are Engaged in Various Efforts to Promote the Utilization of Woody Biomass, but Significant Obstacles to Its Use Remain

## What GAO Found

Most woody biomass utilization activities are implemented by the Departments of Agriculture (USDA), Energy (DOE), and the Interior, and include awarding grants to businesses, schools, Indian tribes, and others; conducting research; and providing education. Most of USDA's woody biomass utilization activities are undertaken by the Forest Service and include grants for woody biomass utilization, research into the use of woody biomass in wood products, and education on potential uses for woody biomass. DOE's woody biomass activities focus on research into using the material for renewable energy, while Interior's efforts consist primarily of education and outreach. Other agencies also provide technical assistance or fund research activities.

Federal agencies coordinate their woody biomass activities through formal and informal mechanisms. Although the agencies have established two interagency groups to coordinate their activities, most officials we spoke with emphasized informal communication—through e-mails, participation in conferences, and other means—as the primary vehicle for interagency coordination. To coordinate activities within their agencies, DOE and Interior have formal mechanisms—DOE coordinates its activities through its Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, while Interior and BLM have appointed officials to oversee, and have issued guidance on, their woody biomass activities. In contrast, while the Forest Service recently issued a woody biomass policy, it has not assigned responsibility for overseeing and coordinating its various woody biomass activities, potentially leading to fragmented efforts and diluting the impact of these activities.

The obstacles to using woody biomass cited most often by agency officials were the difficulty of using woody biomass cost-effectively and the lack of a reliable supply of the material; agency activities generally are targeted toward addressing these obstacles. Some officials told us their agencies are limited in their ability to address these obstacles and that incentives—such as subsidies and tax credits—beyond the agencies' authority are needed. However, others disagreed with this approach for a variety of reasons.

## Examples of Uses for Woody Biomass



Source: Forest Service.

Sign made from wood-plastic composite.



Power generator that uses woody biomass for fuel.