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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-06-314](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) manages 16 irrigation projects on Indian reservations in the western United States. These projects, which were generally constructed in the late 1800s and early 1900s, include water storage facilities and delivery structures for agricultural purposes. Serious concerns have arisen about their maintenance and management.

GAO was asked to examine (1) BIA's estimated deferred maintenance cost for its 16 irrigation projects, (2) what shortcomings, if any, exist in BIA's current management of its irrigation projects, and (3) any issues that need to be addressed to determine the long-term direction of BIA's irrigation program.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that BIA (1) provide the necessary level of technical support to project managers, (2) require project managers to meet at least twice annually with water users, and (3) conduct studies to determine the financial sustainability of the projects.

Although we requested comments from the Department of the Interior on our findings and recommendations, none were provided in time to be included as part of this report.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-314.

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.

INDIAN IRRIGATION PROJECTS

Numerous Issues Need to Be Addressed to Improve Project Management and Financial Sustainability

What GAO Found

BIA estimated the cost for deferred maintenance at its 16 irrigation projects at about \$850 million for 2005, although the agency is in the midst of refining this estimate. BIA acknowledges that this estimate is a work in progress, in part, because some projects incorrectly counted new construction items as deferred maintenance. To further refine its estimate, BIA plans to hire engineering and irrigation experts to conduct thorough condition assessments of all 16 irrigation projects to correctly identify deferred maintenance needs and costs.

BIA's management of some of its irrigation projects has serious shortcomings that undermine effective decisionmaking about project operations and maintenance. First, under BIA's organizational structure, officials with the authority to oversee irrigation project managers generally lack the technical expertise needed to do so effectively, while the staff that have the expertise lack the necessary authority. Second, despite federal regulations that require BIA to consult with project stakeholders in setting project priorities, BIA has not consistently provided project stakeholders with the necessary information or opportunities to participate in project decisionmaking.

The long-term direction of BIA's irrigation program depends on the resolution of several larger issues. Of most importance, BIA does not know to what extent its irrigation projects are capable of financially sustaining themselves, which hinders its ability to address long-standing concerns regarding inadequate funding. Information on financial sustainability, along with accurate deferred maintenance information, are two critical pieces of information that are needed to have a debate on the long-term direction of BIA's irrigation program. Once this information is available, the Congress and interested parties will be able to address how the deferred maintenance will be funded and whether entities other than BIA could more appropriately manage some or all of the projects.

Deferred Maintenance at the Crow Irrigation Project (March 2005)



Source: GAO.
Abandoned Car in Canal



Crumbling Concrete Structure