



Highlights of [GAO-09-877](#), a report to congressional addressees

## WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

### Federal Agencies Have Taken Important Steps Forward, but Additional, Strategic Action Is Needed to Capitalize on Those Steps

#### Why GAO Did This Study

The nation's wildland fire problems have worsened dramatically over the past decade, with more than a doubling of average annual acreage burned and federal appropriations for wildland fire management. The deteriorating fire situation has led the agencies responsible for managing wildland fires on federal lands—the Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture and four agencies in the Department of the Interior—to reassess how they respond to wildland fire and to take steps to improve their fire management programs. GAO reviewed (1) progress the agencies have made in managing wildland fire and (2) key actions GAO previously recommended and believes are still necessary to improve wildland fire management. GAO reviewed previous GAO reports and agency documents and interviewed agency officials. GAO prepared this report under the Comptroller General's authority to conduct evaluations on his own initiative.

#### What GAO Recommends

GAO is making no new recommendations at this time. The agencies have generally agreed with GAO's previous recommendations but have yet to implement several key recommendations GAO believes could, if implemented, substantially assist them in capitalizing on the important progress they have made to date. In commenting on a draft of this report, both the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior generally agreed with its findings.

View [GAO-09-877](#) or key components. For more information, contact Robin Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or [nazzaror@gao.gov](mailto:nazzaror@gao.gov).

#### What GAO Found

The Forest Service and the Interior agencies have improved their understanding of wildland fire's ecological role on the landscape and have taken important steps toward enhancing their ability to cost-effectively protect communities and resources by seeking to (1) make communities and resources less susceptible to being damaged by wildland fire and (2) respond to fire so as to protect communities and important resources at risk but to also consider both the cost and long-term effects of that response. To help them do so, the agencies in recent years have reduced hazardous fuels, in an effort to keep wildland fires from spreading into the wildland-urban interface and to help protect important resources by lessening a fire's intensity; sponsored efforts to educate homeowners about steps they can take to protect their homes from wildland fire; and provided grants to help homeowners carry out these steps. The agencies have also made improvements that lay important groundwork for enhancing their response to wildland fire, including adopting new guidance on how managers in the field are to select firefighting strategies, improving the analytical tools that assist managers in selecting a strategy, and improving how they acquire and use expensive firefighting assets.

Despite the agencies' efforts, much work remains. GAO has recommended several key actions—including development of an overarching fire management strategy—that, if completed, would substantially improve the agencies' management of wildland fire. Nonetheless, the agencies have yet to:

- Develop a cohesive strategy laying out various potential approaches for addressing the growing wildland fire threat, estimated costs associated with each approach, and the trade-offs involved. Such information would help the agencies and Congress make fundamental decisions about an effective and affordable approach to responding to fires.
- Establish a cost-containment strategy that clarifies the importance of containing costs relative to other, often-competing objectives. Without such clarification, GAO believes managers in the field lack a clear understanding of the relative importance that the agencies' leadership places on containing costs and are therefore likely to continue to select firefighting strategies without duly considering the costs of suppression.
- Clarify financial responsibilities for fires that cross federal, state, and local jurisdictions. Unless the financial responsibilities for multijurisdictional fires are clarified, concerns that the existing framework insulates nonfederal entities from the cost of protecting the wildland-urban interface—and that the federal government would therefore continue to bear more than its share of the cost—are unlikely to be addressed.
- Take action to mitigate the effects of rising fire costs on other agency programs. The sharply rising costs of managing wildland fires have led the agencies to transfer funds from other programs to help pay for fire suppression, disrupting or delaying activities in these other programs. Better methods of predicting needed suppression funding could reduce the need to transfer funds from other programs.