

Why GAO Did This Study

The Forest Service within the Department of Agriculture and BIA, BLM, FWS, and NPS within the Department of the Interior have increasingly promoted landscape-scale forest restoration as a way to improve forest health. Through landscape-scale projects, agencies can treat tens or hundreds of thousands of acres, in contrast to projects commonly of under 1,000 acres. Such projects must comply with NEPA by assessing the effects of major federal actions that significantly affect the environment.

GAO was asked to examine federal landscape-scale forest restoration efforts. This report examines (1) the number of such projects the agencies have conducted and how they are scoped; (2) the actions taken by agencies to track the projects' progress; (3) successes and challenges experienced by agencies; and (4) steps taken by agencies to help increase NEPA efficiency for such projects. GAO reviewed agency guidance and documentation related to landscape-scale forest restoration and NEPA processes; examined the number of landscape-scale projects conducted from 2004-2014; and interviewed managers of 20 projects, as well as numerous stakeholders, about their efforts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the agencies take steps to identify project managers' information needs and the most effective and efficient information-sharing mechanisms, and adjust their information-sharing strategies as appropriate. The agencies generally agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations.

View [GAO-15-398](#). For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell at (202) 512-3841 or fennella@gao.gov.

FOREST RESTORATION

Adjusting Agencies' Information-Sharing Strategies Could Benefit Landscape-Scale Projects

What GAO Found

Agencies GAO reviewed—the Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and National Park Service (NPS) in the Department of the Interior—reported conducting 34 landscape-scale forest restoration projects (defined by GAO as projects larger than 50,000 acres with a focus on forests) from 2004 through 2014. The Forest Service reported conducting 24 of the 34 projects; BLM, 8; and NPS, 2. FWS reported no landscape-scale projects, and BIA officials stated that BIA supports but does not collect information on tribal landscape restoration projects. Agency officials said they determined the scope of individual projects, such as project area, based on factors unique to each project, such as the ecological composition of the land.

The three agencies conducting landscape-scale forest restoration projects generally track the progress of individual projects by collecting information on ongoing activities such as acres where vegetation that can fuel wildland fires was reduced, and miles of stream improved or restored. No agency has undertaken a systematic assessment of the results of its landscape-scale restoration activities—that is, the extent to which the projects have achieved their restoration objectives—largely because most of the projects were recently begun, and their results will not be known for years. However, all project managers GAO spoke with were conducting or planning to conduct efforts to collect information on long-term results, and some project managers noted that they have already observed some positive effects, such as an enhanced ability to suppress wildfires.

Agency officials and stakeholders stated that to date they had experienced a variety of successes and challenges, and each agency has mechanisms to share information among projects. Successes included increasing the pace and scale of restoration and achieving efficiencies in project costs and timelines, and challenges included responding to litigation and sustaining stakeholder participation over time. Agencies share information on restoration through mechanisms such as webinars and websites on project management. However, many project managers and stakeholders told GAO that managers would benefit from additional information sharing, such as lessons learned from successes and challenges experienced on other projects. Several managers also said that existing national information-sharing mechanisms were not always the most useful for their specific information needs. GAO has reported on the importance of information sharing to achieve agency objectives and sustain collaboration. Agency officials stated that they have not assessed the information needs of project managers. By taking steps to identify the information needs of project managers and the mechanisms most useful for sharing information, the agencies may enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of landscape-scale projects.

Agency officials and project managers told GAO they are taking steps aimed at increasing the efficiency of their National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) processes for landscape-scale projects by updating agency NEPA guidance and implementing and assessing a variety of approaches aimed at efficiency. However, it is too early to assess the effects of these approaches because projects are generally working under previous NEPA decisions while developing new NEPA analyses using these approaches.