

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-49](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

Aquatic invasive species—harmful, nonnative plants, animals, and microorganisms living in aquatic habitats—damage ecosystems or threaten commercial, agricultural, and recreational activities. The Nonindigenous Aquatic Nuisance Prevention and Control Act of 1990 created the Task Force and required it to develop an aquatic nuisance (which GAO refers to as invasive) species program. The Water Resources Reform and Development Act of 2014 includes a provision that GAO assess federal costs of, and spending on, aquatic invasive species.

This report examines (1) how much Task Force member agencies expended addressing aquatic invasive species for fiscal years 2012-2014; (2) activities conducted by Task Force member agencies and challenges in addressing aquatic invasive species; and (3) the extent to which the Task Force has measured progress in achieving the goals of its 2013-2017 strategic plan. GAO sent a questionnaire to member agencies to obtain expenditures for fiscal years 2012-2014; interviewed member agency officials; and analyzed laws and strategic planning documents.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Task Force develop a mechanism to measure progress toward its strategic goals and help meet certain statutory requirements. Most member agencies generally concurred or had no comments, but NOAA disagreed. GAO believes its recommendation is valid as discussed further in this report.

View [GAO-16-49](#). For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell at (202) 512-3841 or [fennella@gao.gov](mailto:fennella@gao.gov).

November 2015

## AQUATIC INVASIVE SPECIES

### Additional Steps Could Help Measure Federal Progress in Achieving Strategic Goals

## What GAO Found

The 13 federal member agencies of the Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force (Task Force) estimated expending an average of about \$260 million annually for fiscal years 2012 through 2014 to address aquatic invasive species. However, several member agencies identified in their questionnaire responses challenges in developing their estimates. For example, some member agencies reported that their activities to address aquatic invasive species were often integrated into larger projects, making it difficult to isolate the portion of expenditures specific to aquatic invasive species out of total expenditures for the projects. As a result, expenditure information reported by GAO generally reflects member agencies' best estimates of total expenditures, rather than actual expenditures.

Task Force member agencies conducted a wide range of activities and identified several challenges in addressing aquatic invasive species. Member agencies reported conducting activities across several activity categories, including taking actions to prevent introductions, control the spread of existing invaders, and research ecological impacts of aquatic invasive species. For instance, most conducted prevention activities—such as constructing a series of electric barriers to prevent the entry of Asian Carp from the Mississippi River Basin into the Great Lakes—recognizing that prevention activities may be the most cost-effective method of addressing aquatic invasive species. Additionally, officials from several member agencies expressed concern that their activities, though numerous, may not be adequate relative to the growing magnitude and impacts of aquatic invasive species amid decreasing or constrained agency resources.

The Task Force—which is co-chaired by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)—developed a 2013-2017 strategic plan to guide its member agencies but has not taken key steps to measure progress in achieving the goals laid out in its strategic plan. As called for in its strategic plan, the Task Force in 2012 planned to develop an operational plan to track and measure aquatic invasive species activities and progress. However, the Task Force did not develop an operational plan because of constrained funding and limited resources, according to Task Force representatives. The Task Force also did not meet several of the 1990 Act's requirements including describing its members' roles and activities and reporting annually to Congress on the program's progress. The representatives agreed that a mechanism to track activities and measure progress is important and said they plan to discuss the possibility of doing so at their November 2015 meeting. Task Force representatives, however, had not established a time frame or specifics for their approach. Developing and regularly using a tracking mechanism could help the Task Force measure progress in achieving its strategic goals, as well as help the Task Force meet the 1990 Act's requirements to describe its members' roles and specific activities and to report annually to Congress on the program's progress.