

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106239](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs, Committee on Natural Resources, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Wildfire severity has increased across the U.S., causing loss of life and property and damage to ecosystems. To mitigate wildfire risk and improve forest health, the Forest Service uses prescribed fire to reduce fuels. The agency reports that less than 1 percent of prescribed fires escape control and become wildfires, but escapes can have significant effects.

GAO was asked to review the Forest Service's efforts to improve its prescribed fire program following two escapes in New Mexico in 2022. This report addresses, among other things, (1) steps the agency has taken to reform its prescribed fire program and (2) the extent to which it has followed selected leading practices for effective agency reforms. GAO reviewed relevant Forest Service documents; interviewed officials from agency headquarters, regional offices, and national forests; interviewed stakeholders and Tribes; and conducted in-person site visits and interviews in Idaho and New Mexico.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to the Forest Service related to its prescribed fire efforts: (1) develop outcome-oriented goals and performance measures; (2) develop and implement a strategic workforce plan; (3) develop an implementation plan for its reform efforts; and (4) assess the appropriate level of resources to maintain day-to-day management of reform efforts. The Forest Service generally agreed with the report and recommendations, and plans to develop and implement a corrective action plan to address the findings.

View [GAO-24-106239](#). For more information, contact Cardell Johnson at (202) 512-3841 or JohnsonCD1@gao.gov.

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FOREST SERVICE

Fully Following Leading Practices for Agency Reforms Would Strengthen Prescribed Fire Program

What GAO Found

The U.S. Forest Service plans to increase its use of prescribed fire—deliberate burning in specific areas under managed conditions—to mitigate wildfire risk. The agency reviewed its prescribed fire program in 2022 and recommended reforms to enhance the program's safety. Since then, the agency has implemented some of the reforms and taken steps to address others.

In undertaking these reforms, the Forest Service generally followed the leading practice for involving employees and key stakeholders, and partially followed four other selected leading practices, leaving gaps.

Extent to Which the Forest Service Has Followed Selected Leading Practices for Effective Agency Reforms

Practice	Extent followed
Establishing goals and outcomes	○
Involving employees and key stakeholders	●
Strategic workforce planning	◐
Managing and monitoring	◐
Leadership focus and attention	◐

● Generally followed—addressed most or all aspects of the selected key questions GAO examined for this practice ◐ Partially followed—addressed some, but not most, aspects of the selected key questions GAO examined for this practice ○ Not followed—did not address the selected key questions GAO examined for this practice

Source: GAO analysis of Forest Service documents and interviews with Forest Service officials and stakeholders. | GAO-24-106239

Specifically, GAO identified gaps in these areas:

- **Establishing goals and outcomes.** The agency has ongoing efforts to develop outcome-oriented performance measures and goals, such as reducing risk in areas most susceptible to wildfire damage, but has struggled for years to develop these measures and goals, which are critical for evaluating success.
- **Strategic workforce planning.** One official told GAO the agency formed a committee in 2024 to help address challenges with maintaining adequate and trained staff. However, the official noted that the effort is in its infancy and did not provide details, documentation, or a time frame for completing the plan.
- **Managing and monitoring.** The agency has established time frames and is tracking progress for some reforms it identified for its program, such as expanding training and developing a resource mobilization strategy. However, it does not have an implementation plan that outlines next steps and future milestones for other reforms it intends to undertake.
- **Leadership focus and attention.** The Chief of the Forest Service has consistently articulated the need to reform the agency's prescribed fire program, but the agency risks not dedicating sufficient staff resources for day-to-day management of reform efforts.

According to agency documents, the Forest Service recognizes the reforms it is making will require major changes to agency practices and culture. By fully following leading practices, the Forest Service would have better assurance that its efforts to safely expand its use of prescribed fire will succeed.