

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107390](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In 1989, the supertanker Exxon Valdez spilled over 11 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound. Since its formation in response to this incident, JPO has played a critical role in coordinating TAPS oversight among federal and state agencies. Almost 35 years after the spill, some stakeholders have expressed concern that JPO no longer effectively coordinates safety oversight.

GAO was asked to review changes in JPO's activities, as well as JPO's collaborative efforts. This report (1) describes how JPO's safety oversight activities have changed since 1990, and (2) evaluates the extent to which JPO's safety oversight activities align with leading collaboration practices.

GAO reviewed documents and interviewed officials from four federal and four Alaska state JPO agencies. GAO conducted site visits in Valdez and Anchorage, Alaska. GAO also analyzed PHMSA data on pipeline accidents; reviewed relevant statutes and regulations; and interviewed 13 stakeholders from industry, safety, environmental, and other groups. In addition, GAO compared JPO's safety oversight activities with leading collaboration practices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that BLM, in collaboration with other JPO agencies, (1) redefine and document the intended outcomes of JPO's safety oversight activities, and (2) clarify and document agencies' roles and responsibilities, including identifying any potential gaps in safety oversight. The Department of the Interior did not provide comments on the report.

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TRANS-ALASKA PIPELINE:

Clarifying the Roles of Joint Pipeline Office Agencies Would Enhance Safety Oversight

What GAO Found

The Joint Pipeline Office (JPO) coordinates oversight of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) among six federal agencies—including the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which is the lead federal agency and the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA)—as well as six Alaska state agencies. TAPS includes an 800-mile pipeline and the Valdez Marine Terminal, where the oil is loaded onto tankers. Since JPO's formation in 1990, member agencies have scaled back their approach to joint oversight and reporting. JPO agencies initially shared a physical office and published public reports on their joint monitoring activities. Starting in 2005, JPO reduced its joint activities and public reporting due to fewer projects along the pipeline and shifts in federal roles. In recent years, individual JPO agencies have continued to provide oversight and JPO has served as a forum for participating agencies to share information and coordinate oversight.

Aboveground Portion of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline near Fairbanks, Alaska



Source: GAO. | GAO-25-107390

GAO found that JPO's activities generally align with five of eight leading practices that are critical for effective interagency collaboration, such as identifying and sustaining leadership and including relevant participants. However, JPO's activities do not align with three leading collaboration practices: defining common outcomes, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and updating written agreements. Specifically, JPO no longer works toward several intended outcomes that it documented in 2008, including producing public reports. In addition, some JPO agencies and stakeholders said JPO members' roles and responsibilities were unclear and raised concerns about possible gaps in oversight, especially at the Valdez Marine Terminal. Redefining and documenting the intended outcomes of JPO's oversight activities, such as those aiming to inform the public of its oversight efforts, would help JPO agencies work toward shared goals. In addition, clarifying and documenting participating agencies' roles and responsibilities would help it identify any potential gaps in oversight that could affect safety.