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Comptroller General
of the United States

Accessible Version

May 21, 2024

The Honorable Michael S. Regan
Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20460

Priority Open Recommendations: Environmental Protection Agency

Dear Administrator Regan:

The purpose of this letter is to provide an update on the overall status of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) implementation of GAO's recommendations and to call your continued personal attention to areas where open recommendations should be given high priority.¹ In November 2023, we reported that, on a government-wide basis, 75 percent of our recommendations made 4 years ago were implemented.² EPA's recommendation implementation rate was 86 percent. As of May 2024, EPA has 78 open recommendations. Fully implementing these open recommendations could significantly improve agency operations.

Since our May 2023 letter, EPA implemented four of our 15 open priority recommendations, including three recommendations related to assessing and controlling toxic chemicals and one related to protecting the nation's air quality.

- In May 2023, EPA's chemical assessment program provided information to its program and regional offices about the various chemical assessment products available, how they differ, and the length of time each takes to prepare. This information will facilitate offices' chemical assessment nominations by providing greater predictability about options, thereby helping offices determine which product best meets their needs, consistent with the intent of our recommendation in our December 2011 report.³
- In April 2024, EPA's chemical assessment program completed an analysis to address resource needs. The analysis included metrics for evaluating the assessment program's workforce recruitment and retention strategies. This effort will help the program and EPA leadership assess the level of resources that

¹Priority recommendations are those that GAO believes warrant priority attention from heads of key departments or agencies. They are highlighted because, upon implementation, they may significantly improve government operations, for example, by realizing large dollar savings; eliminating mismanagement, fraud, and abuse; or making progress toward addressing a high-risk or duplication issue.

²GAO, *Performance and Accountability Report: Fiscal Year 2023*, [GAO-24-900483](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2023).

³GAO, *Chemical Assessments: Challenges Remain with EPA's Integrated Risk Information System Program*, [GAO-12-42](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 9, 2011).

should be dedicated to the program to meet user needs and to maintain a viable risk information database, consistent with the intent of our March 2008 recommendation.⁴

- The April 2024 analysis also included information on staff specializations, mission critical capabilities, and demand for chemical assessments. Such data will support plans to monitor and evaluate the program's progress toward achieving human capital goals, consistent with our recommendation in our December 2020 report.⁵
- In January 2024, EPA issued a memorandum outlining an asset management framework for the national ambient air quality monitoring system, consistent with our November 2020 recommendation.⁶ Under the framework, tribal, state, and local agencies will report information annually about air quality monitoring assets to EPA. According to EPA, this information will enhance oversight and help guide investments to the highest priorities for the monitoring system.

We ask for your continued attention to the remaining 11 priority recommendations. We are also adding one new recommendation related to protecting the nation's air quality, focused on EPA developing a coordinated approach for its actions to help communities prepare for and respond to the air quality risks of wildfire smoke. This brings the total number of our priority recommendations to 12. (See the Enclosure for the list of recommendations.)

The 12 priority recommendations fall into the following five areas:

Improving the nation's water quality. Over the past 50 years, the quality of our nation's waters and drinking water has improved. However, threats to water quality and safety remain. Implementing our five priority recommendations would improve EPA's ability to protect the quality of our nation's water resources by managing risks from harmful algal blooms and hypoxia and taking stronger actions to address the problem of nonpoint source pollution. For example, we recommended that EPA, working with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and other agencies, develop a national goal for the working group focused on efforts to prevent harmful algal blooms and hypoxia. We also recommended that EPA take actions to include additional elements for its pollution targets, known as total maximum daily loads. Doing so will help the nation's lakes, rivers, streams, and other water bodies meet water quality standards.

Addressing data and risk communication issues related to drinking water and wastewater infrastructure. The nation's drinking water is among the safest in the world, but contamination does occur, causing illnesses and even deaths. Implementing our three priority recommendations in this area—one related to risk communication and two related to data quality—could improve EPA's ability to address drinking water and wastewater infrastructure issues. For example, we recommended that EPA resume data verification audits to evaluate the quality of selected drinking water data. As a sector risk management agency for water and

⁴GAO, *Chemical Assessments: Low Productivity and New Interagency Review Process Limit the Usefulness and Credibility of EPA's Integrated Risk Information System*, [GAO-08-440](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 7, 2008).

⁵GAO, *Chemical Assessments: Annual EPA Survey Inconsistent with Leading Practices in Program Management*, [GAO-21-156](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 18, 2020).

⁶GAO, *Air Pollution: Opportunities to Better Sustain and Modernize the National Air Quality Monitoring System*, [GAO-21-38](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 12, 2020).

wastewater treatment, we urge you to implement these priority recommendations related to protecting critical infrastructure.

Managing climate risks. In February 2013, we added the [Limiting the Federal Government's Fiscal Exposure by Better Managing Climate Change Risks area](#) to our High-Risk List.⁷ Extreme weather related to climate change can threaten utilities that produce drinking water and treat wastewater.⁸ By fully implementing our priority recommendation to integrate technical assistance providers into a network to help utilities incorporate climate resilience in infrastructure projects and planning, EPA could better address climate risks that water utilities face.

Protecting the nation's air quality. EPA reported that approximately 100 million people live in counties where one or more air quality standards were exceeded in 2021. EPA sets these standards at levels intended to protect public health, including the health of susceptible and vulnerable populations. We have identified two priority recommendations in this area. More specifically, addressing our priority recommendation to implement an air quality monitoring modernization plan would help EPA better position the national ambient air quality monitoring system to provide critical information for managing air quality and protect public health. In addition, by implementing our priority recommendation to develop and document a coordinated approach for EPA's actions to help communities prepare for and respond to air quality and public health risks from wildfire smoke, EPA could more effectively target limited resources to its highest priorities.

Ensuring cybersecurity at EPA. Federal agencies face a growing number of threats to their information technology systems and data. To protect against these threats, federal law and policies establish that agencies should adopt a risk-based approach to cybersecurity by effectively identifying, prioritizing, and managing cyber risks. Implementing our priority recommendation to establish a process for conducting an agency-wide cybersecurity risk assessment would help EPA better manage its cybersecurity risks.

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In April 2023, we issued our biennial update to our [High-Risk List](#). This list identifies government operations with greater vulnerabilities to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement. It also identifies the need for transformation to address economy, efficiency, or effectiveness challenges.⁹ One of our high-risk areas—[transforming EPA's process for assessing and controlling toxic chemicals](#)—centers directly on EPA. Another high-risk area—[limiting the federal government's fiscal exposure by better managing climate change risks](#)—is shared among multiple agencies, including EPA.

Several other government-wide, high-risk areas also have direct implications for EPA and its operations, such as the [ensuring the cybersecurity of the nation area](#), where there is one priority

⁷GAO, *High-Risk Series: Efforts Made to Achieve Progress Need to be Maintained and Expanded to Fully Address All Areas*, [GAO-23-106203](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 20, 2023) and *High-Risk Series: An Update*, [GAO-13-283](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 14, 2013).

⁸Water and Wastewater Sector Strategic Roadmap Work Group, *Roadmap to a Secure and Resilient Water and Wastewater Sector* (May 2017); and U.S. Global Change Research Program, *Climate Science Special Report, Fourth National Climate Assessment*, vol. I (Washington, D.C.: 2017).

⁹[GAO-23-106203](#).

recommendation. The other areas include (1) [improving the management of IT acquisitions and operations](#), (2) [improving strategic human capital management](#), (3) [managing federal real property](#), and (4) [improving the government-wide personnel security clearance process](#).

In addition to EPA's high-risk area, we urge your continued attention to the other government-wide high-risk issues as they relate to EPA. Progress on high-risk issues has been possible through the concerted actions and efforts of Congress, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and the leadership and staff in agencies, including within EPA. In March 2022, we issued a report on key practices to successfully address high-risk areas, which can be a helpful resource as your agency continues to make progress to address high-risk issues.¹⁰

We also recognize the key role Congress plays in providing oversight and maintaining focus on our recommendations to ensure they are implemented and produce their desired results. Legislation enacted in December 2022 included a provision for GAO to identify any additional congressional oversight actions that can help agencies implement priority recommendations and address any underlying issues relating to such implementation.¹¹

Congress can use various strategies to address our recommendations, such as incorporating them into legislation. Congress can also use its budget, appropriations, and oversight processes to incentivize executive branch agencies to act on our recommendations and monitor their progress. For example, Congress can hold hearings focused on EPA's progress in implementing GAO's priority recommendations, withhold funds when appropriate, or take other actions to provide incentives for agencies to act. Moreover, Congress could follow up during the appropriations process and request periodic updates. Congress also plays a key role in addressing any underlying issues related to the implementation of these recommendations. For example, Congress could pass legislation providing an agency explicit authority to implement a recommendation or requiring an agency to take certain actions to implement a recommendation.

Copies of this report are being sent to the Director of OMB and the appropriate congressional committees. In addition, the report will be available on the GAO website at [Priority Open Recommendation Letters | U.S. GAO](#).

I appreciate EPA's continued commitment to these important issues. If you have any questions or would like to discuss any of the issues outlined in this letter, please do not hesitate to contact me or Mark Gaffigan, Managing Director, Natural Resources and Environment, at (202) 512-3841 or gaffiganm@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Our teams will continue to coordinate

¹⁰GAO, *High-Risk Series: Key Practices to Successfully Address High-Risk Areas and Remove Them from the List*, [GAO-22-105184](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 3, 2022).

¹¹James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, Pub. L. No. 117-263, § 7211(a)(2), 136 Stat. 2395, 3668 (2022); H.R. Rep. No. 117-389 (2022) (accompanying Legislative Branch Appropriations Act, H.R. 8237, 117th Cong. (2022)).

with your staff on all of the 78 open recommendations, including the recommendations in the high-risk areas for which EPA has a leading role. Thank you for your attention to these matters.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gene L. Dodaro". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "D" and a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
of the United States

Enclosure

cc: The Honorable Shalanda Young, Director, OMB

The Honorable Bruno Pigott, Acting Assistant Administrator, Office of Water, EPA

The Honorable Joseph Goffman, Assistant Administrator, Office of Air and Radiation,
EPA

Enclosure

Priority Open Recommendations to the Environmental Protection Agency

Improving the Nation's Water Quality

Clean Water Act: Changes Needed If Key EPA Program Is to Help Fulfill the Nation's Water Quality Goals. [GAO-14-80](#). Washington, D.C.: December 5, 2013.

Year Recommendation Made: 2014

Recommendation: To enhance the likelihood that Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDL) support the nation's waters' attainment of water quality standards and to strengthen water quality management, the Administrator of EPA should develop and issue new regulations requiring that TMDLs include additional elements—and consider requiring the elements that are now optional—specifically, elements reflecting key features identified by the National Research Council as necessary for attaining water quality standards, such as comprehensive identification of impairment and plans to monitor water bodies to verify that water quality is improving.

Actions Needed: EPA agreed with the findings that supported our recommendation but did not agree to take the recommended action. In June 2020, EPA officials told us they considered the recommendation to be implemented based on the actions EPA took to carry out a new vision for the TMDL program. We agree that EPA's actions can help the agency and states improve the TMDL program, but believe those actions are insufficient because they do not carry the force of regulations. In July 2020, EPA officials told us they did not believe the agency could issue the recommended regulations under the agency's current authority. The officials also stated that EPA had no plans to develop TMDL regulations to address our recommendation. As of April 2024, EPA officials told us that the agency had not changed its position.

We continue to believe that EPA has the authority to issue the regulations we recommended, so long as it follows all applicable procedural and substantive requirements. We also believe that the problems of nonpoint source pollution, which is a major contributor to pollution in our nation's waters, require stronger action, such as issuing new regulations. To fully implement our recommendation, EPA needs to develop TMDL regulations that include additional elements, such as comprehensive identification of impairment and plans to monitor water bodies to verify that water quality is improving. Doing so will better ensure that TMDLs help water bodies attain water quality standards.

Director: Alfredo Gómez, Natural Resources and Environment

Contact Information: gomezj@gao.gov, (202) 512-3841

Water Quality: Agencies Should Take More Actions to Manage Risks from Harmful Algal Blooms and Hypoxia. [GAO-22-104449](#). Washington, D.C.: June 15, 2022.

Year Recommendations Made: 2022

Recommendations:

- 1) The Administrator of EPA and the Administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), in collaboration with the members of the working

group, should document and define what a national harmful algal bloom (HAB) and hypoxia program would entail, including identifying the program's resource needs.

- 2) The Administrator of EPA and the Administrator of NOAA, in collaboration with the members of the working group, should develop a national goal for the group focused on efforts to prevent HABs and hypoxia.
- 3) The Administrator of EPA, working with the other members of the working group, should develop an interagency framework, including prioritizing water bodies and identifying resource needs, to expand monitoring of freshwater HABs and hypoxia.
- 4) The Administrator of EPA, working with the other members of the working group, should develop an interagency framework, including prioritizing water bodies and identifying resource needs, to expand forecasting of freshwater HABs and hypoxia.

Actions Needed: EPA agreed with our recommendations. For the first recommendation, EPA officials told us that, as of April 2024, the agency was working with NOAA and other members of the interagency HAB and hypoxia working group to develop a national program, including developing associated goals and identifying resource needs. These officials also stated that they plan to include information about the national program structure and resource needs in the next national assessment of HABs and hypoxia, which is expected to be completed in December 2024. By defining and documenting what a national HAB and hypoxia program would entail, EPA and NOAA, as co-chairs of the working group, would be better positioned to implement the program and enhance federal efforts to manage the risks of HABs and hypoxia.

For the second recommendation, in March 2024, EPA stated that it was taking actions, in consultation with NOAA and other members of the working group, to develop a national goal focused on efforts to prevent HABs and hypoxia. These officials also stated that this goal will subsequently be incorporated into a national HAB and hypoxia strategy in the national assessment of HABs and hypoxia which is expected to be completed in December 2024. In April 2024, EPA and NOAA developed national objectives for the working group, including an objective to help decision-makers prevent new or the expansion of existing HABs or hypoxia events through advancing the dissemination of information on their human-caused drivers. By developing and subsequently incorporating this objective into the national HAB and hypoxia strategy, the working group could help increase federal attention on preventative actions to reduce the risks that HABs and hypoxia pose to tribal, state, and local communities.

To address the third and fourth recommendations, as of April 2024, EPA was collaborating with NOAA and other members of the working group to develop a framework to expand monitoring and forecasting of freshwater HABs and hypoxia, according to EPA officials. This framework will identify resource needs for freshwater monitoring and forecasting as well as prioritize water bodies in which to expand freshwater monitoring and forecasting capabilities. EPA also stated that it expects to complete a draft of this framework in June 2024. By developing an interagency framework for expanding the monitoring and forecasting of freshwater HAB and hypoxia events, EPA and the working group will be better positioned to obtain the information needed to manage the risks from such events.

Director: Alfredo Gómez, Natural Resources and Environment

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Addressing Data and Risk Communication Issues Related to Drinking Water and Wastewater Infrastructure

Drinking Water: Unreliable State Data Limit EPA's Ability to Target Enforcement Priorities and Communicate Water Systems' Performance. [GAO-11-381](#). Washington, D.C.: June 17, 2011.

Year Recommendation Made: 2011

Recommendation: To improve EPA's ability to oversee the states' implementation of the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) and provide Congress and the public with more complete and accurate information on compliance, the Administrator of EPA should resume data verification audits to routinely evaluate the quality of selected drinking water data on health-based and monitoring violations that the states provide to EPA. These audits should also evaluate the quality of data on the enforcement actions that states and other primacy agencies have taken to correct violations.

Actions Needed: EPA partially agreed with our recommendation. As of April 2024, EPA continues to work on modernizing its Safe Drinking Water Information System (SDWIS) and expects to start transitioning states to the system by early 2026. In addition, EPA plans to engage with states as it develops data quality goals for monitoring violations and other information. However, our recommendation was that EPA resume data verification audits. In March 2022, EPA told us it was not planning to resume the audits due to budgetary constraints. Instead, EPA said it was taking other actions to improve its ability to oversee the quality of drinking water data that states provide to EPA. For example, the agency told us it was evaluating data quality with a three-pronged approach that uses (1) electronic reporting through the Compliance Monitoring Data Portal, (2) automated data quality assurance tools, and (3) state file reviews.

Overall, more information is needed on the extent to which EPA's efforts have resulted in more accurate and complete data on water systems' compliance with SDWA. EPA estimated that there has been an 80 percent reduction in data flow errors, in which a state or region issues a violation notice to the water system that is reported to the state data system but not correctly transferred to the federal system. However, it is unclear whether this information is representative of all states, in part, because of the limited number of states it included in its data quality checks. In addition, questions remain about issues, such as compliance determination errors—when a violation occurs but the state does not issue a violation notice to the water system and does not report that violation to the federal system.

Furthermore, EPA needs additional information to assess the extent to which its efforts to modernize SDWIS will improve the agency's ability to oversee states' implementation of SDWA and provide Congress and the public with more complete and accurate information on compliance. We will continue to monitor EPA's actions to update its systems and oversee the quality of data reported by states. Updating systems and data reporting will allow EPA to determine the location and extent of violations more completely and accurately, which could improve data quality and the effectiveness of the agency's oversight of states. With more reliable data, we believe EPA will also be able to target its compliance and enforcement resources more effectively.

Director: Alfredo Gómez, Natural Resources and Environment

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Drinking Water: Additional Data and Statistical Analysis May Enhance EPA's Oversight of the Lead and Copper Rule. [GAO-17-424](#). Washington, D.C.: September 1, 2017.

Year Recommendation Made: 2017

Recommendation: The Assistant Administrator for Water of EPA’s Office of Water and the Assistant Administrator of EPA’s Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance should develop a statistical analysis that incorporates multiple factors—including those currently in the SDWIS/Fed and others such as the presence of lead pipes and the use of corrosion control—to identify water systems that might pose a higher likelihood for violating the Lead and Copper Rule once complete violations data are obtained, such as through SDWIS Prime.

Actions Needed: EPA agreed with our recommendation. In April 2023, the agency proposed revisions to the Consumer Confidence Report Rule that, if finalized, would require states and others with primary enforcement authority to annually report drinking water compliance monitoring data to EPA, starting in 2026.¹² We think this proposed rule is a good step forward, but EPA had not finalized the rule, as of April 2024. To fully implement our recommendation, once the rule is finalized, EPA will need to demonstrate plans for using the improved compliance monitoring data, including developing the statistical analysis we recommended. By fully implementing our recommendation, EPA will be better able to target its oversight of water systems.

Director: Alfredo Gómez, Natural Resources and Environment

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Drinking Water: EPA Could Use Available Data to Better Identify Neighborhoods at Risk of Lead Exposure. [GAO-21-78](#). Washington, D.C.: December 18, 2020.

Year Recommendation Made: 2021

Recommendation: EPA’s Assistant Administrator for Water should develop a strategic plan that meets the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation (WIIN) Act requirement for providing targeted outreach, education, technical assistance, and risk communication to populations affected by the concentration of lead in public water systems, and that is fully consistent with leading practices for strategic plans.¹³

Actions Needed: EPA disagreed with our recommendation. As of April 2024, EPA maintains that the proposed Lead and Copper Rule Improvements rule, published in December 2023, is responsive to our recommendation.¹⁴ According to EPA officials, the rule has several key provisions, including strengthening protections to reduce exposure to lead in drinking water. However, the proposed rule is not a strategic plan and does not include all of the elements required by the WIIN Act for the strategic plan. The WIIN Act requires EPA to develop a strategic plan to provide targeted outreach, education, technical assistance, and risk communication undertaken by EPA, states, and public water systems to populations affected by the concentration of lead in public water systems—including dissemination of information to households when there are certain exceedances of the lead action level. We maintain that

¹²88 Fed. Reg. 20092 (Apr. 5, 2023).

¹³Pub. L. No. 114-322, § 2106(a)(6), 130 Stat. 1628, 1724 (2016) (*codified at* 42 U.S.C. § 300g-3(c)(5)(A)).

¹⁴88 Fed. Reg. 84878 (Dec. 6, 2023).

implementing our recommendation will give EPA greater assurance that it has effectively planned for how to communicate to the public the risks of lead in drinking water.

Director: Alfredo Gómez, Natural Resources and Environment

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Managing Climate Risks

Water Infrastructure: Technical Assistance and Climate Resilience Planning Could Help Utilities Prepare for Potential Climate Change Impacts. [GAO-20-24](#). Washington, D.C.: January 16, 2020.

Year Recommendation Made: 2020

Recommendation: The Director of Water Security of EPA, as Chair of the Water Sector Government Coordinating Council, should work with the council to identify existing technical assistance providers and engage these providers in a network to help drinking water and wastewater utilities incorporate climate resilience into their projects and planning on an ongoing basis.

Actions Needed: EPA neither agreed nor disagreed with our recommendation but has taken actions that are consistent with our recommendation, including hosting webinars and trainings that reached 29,500 personnel from water and wastewater systems. In March 2024, EPA officials said that the Creating Resilient Water Utilities (CRWU) initiative is now part of EPA's national Water Technical Assistance (WaterTA) effort that is building a network of technical assistance providers, which EPA said will help water systems address infrastructure issues, including climate resilience. EPA officials said the agency is using the WaterTA effort to support the effective implementation of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which provided \$50 billion to address water infrastructure needs, including building system climate resilience. EPA officials said the CRWU program is part of the WaterTA effort and receives requests from technical assistance providers in the network.

The creation of the WaterTA network is a good step toward coordinating technical assistance provided to water and wastewater utilities. However, according to EPA officials, the agency has engaged with members of the water sector coordinating committee but has not raised climate resilience and technical assistance as an agenda item for the committee to act on. Further, WaterTA providers include a wide range of university, nonprofit, and agency entities with water expertise, but not all of them have climate expertise. EPA officials said that the network will continue to evolve.

To fully implement our recommendation, EPA should work with the water sector and other federal agencies to include additional technical assistance providers in the WaterTA network that would help utilities incorporate climate resilience into their planning and projects on an ongoing basis. These actions will help ensure that drinking water and wastewater infrastructure projects that receive federal financial assistance adequately address risks from climate change.

High-Risk Area: [Limiting the Federal Government's Fiscal Exposure by Better Managing Climate Change Risks](#)

Director: Alfredo Gómez, Natural Resources and Environment

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Protecting the Nation's Air Quality

Air Pollution: Opportunities to Better Sustain and Modernize the National Air Quality Monitoring System. [GAO-21-38](#). Washington, D.C.: November 12, 2020.

Year Recommendation Made: 2021

Recommendation: The Assistant Administrator of EPA's Office of Air and Radiation, in consultation with state and local agencies and other relevant federal agencies, should develop and make public an air quality monitoring modernization plan to better meet the additional information needs of air quality managers, researchers, and the public. Such a plan could address the ongoing challenges in modernizing the national ambient air quality monitoring system by considering leading practices, including establishing priorities and roles, assessing risks to success, identifying the resources needed to achieve goals, and measuring and evaluating progress.

Actions Needed: EPA agreed with our recommendation. EPA also stated that to ensure success, the agency needed to engage stakeholders from tribal, state, and local air monitoring agencies. As of April 2024, EPA officials said that the agency will continue to work with stakeholders to establish an approach, goals, and priorities for an air quality monitoring modernization plan. Officials also stated that EPA was using funding from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 and Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 to make investments in air quality monitoring to help address the information needs we identified in our report. By continuing to take actions to fully implement our recommendation—including finalizing and making public its air quality modernization plan—EPA will better ensure it can protect public health as future air quality issues emerge.

Director: Alfredo Gómez, Natural Resources and Environment

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Wildfire Smoke: Opportunities to Strengthen Federal Efforts to Manage Growing Risks. [GAO-23-104723](#). Washington, D.C.: March 13, 2023.

Year Recommendation Made: 2023

Recommendation: The Administrator of EPA should develop and document a coordinated approach for EPA's actions to help communities prepare for and respond to the air quality and public health risks of wildfire smoke. The approach should align with leading practices for collaboration, including establishing goals, identifying and leveraging resources, and clarifying key stakeholder roles and responsibilities.

Actions Needed: EPA agreed with this recommendation. According to EPA officials, as of April 2024, the agency has identified several internal organizational structures to manage its wildfire work and identified goals to facilitate a more coordinated and strategic approach to addressing wildfire smoke issues. Also, in November 2023, EPA took steps to clarify key roles and responsibilities with its partners by signing a memorandum of understanding on wildland fire and air quality coordination with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Department of the Interior, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

To fully implement our recommendation, EPA should also document an internally coordinated approach to guide its actions that aligns with leading practices for collaboration. Such practices include establishing common goals across the agency and monitoring progress toward these goals; identifying and leveraging funding and staffing resources; and clarifying roles and responsibilities, including by working with its tribal, federal, state, and local partners to do so. Fully implementing our recommendation will allow EPA to target limited resources more effectively to the highest priorities.

Director: Alfredo Gómez, Natural Resources and Environment

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Ensuring Cybersecurity at EPA

Cybersecurity: Agencies Need to Fully Establish Risk Management Programs and Address Challenges. [GAO-19-384](#). Washington, D.C.: July 25, 2019.

Year Recommendation Made: 2019

Recommendation: The Administrator of EPA should establish a process for conducting an organization-wide cybersecurity risk assessment.

Actions Needed: EPA neither agreed nor disagreed with this recommendation. However, EPA has updated its cybersecurity risk management strategy, which calls for the agency to develop an organization-wide perspective on cybersecurity risks. As of April 2024, EPA stated that it was continuing to plan for an organization-wide cybersecurity risk assessment and plans to issue the assessment in late summer to early fall of 2024. EPA officials added that they were in the process of updating an internal procedure to address ongoing risk assessment activities. Until EPA establishes a process for conducting an organization-wide cybersecurity risk assessment, it may be missing opportunities to identify trends in cybersecurity risks, target systemic risks to the agency and its systems, and prioritize investments in risk mitigation activities.

High-Risk Area: [Ensuring the Cybersecurity of the Nation](#)

Director: Marisol Cruz Cain, Information Technology and Cybersecurity

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