

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-279](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Finance, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Wildlife trafficking—the poaching and illegal trade of plants, fish, and wildlife—is a multibillion-dollar, global criminal activity that imperils thousands of species. FWS and NOAA enforce laws prohibiting wildlife trafficking that authorize the agencies to pay financial rewards for information about such illegal activities.

GAO was asked to review FWS's and NOAA's use of financial rewards to combat wildlife trafficking. This report examines (1) laws that authorize FWS and NOAA to pay rewards for information on wildlife trafficking and the extent to which the agencies paid such rewards from fiscal years 2007 through 2017, (2) the agencies' reward policies, (3) information available to the public on rewards, and (4) the extent to which the agencies reviewed the effectiveness of their use of rewards.

GAO reviewed laws, examined FWS and NOAA policies and public communications on rewards, analyzed agency reward data for fiscal years 2007 through 2017 and assessed their reliability, interviewed FWS and NOAA officials, and compared agency policies and public communications on rewards to federal internal control standards.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations, including that FWS and NOAA track reward information, FWS augment its reward policy to specify factors for agents to consider when developing proposed reward amounts, FWS and NOAA develop plans to communicate more reward information to the public, and FWS and NOAA review the effectiveness of their reward use. Both agencies concurred with these recommendations.

View [GAO-18-279](#). For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell at (202) 512-3841 or fennella@gao.gov.

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COMBATING WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING

Opportunities Exist to Improve the Use of Financial Rewards

What GAO Found

Multiple laws—such as the Endangered Species Act and Lacey Act—authorize the Departments of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to pay rewards for information on wildlife trafficking. FWS and NOAA reported paying few rewards from fiscal years 2007 through 2017. Specifically, the agencies collectively reported paying 27 rewards, totaling \$205,500. Agency officials said that the information was complete to the best of their knowledge but could not sufficiently assure that this information represented all of their reward payments.

Turtle Taped for Transport (Left) and Other Illegally Trafficked Turtles (Right) Recovered Based on Information from a Source Who Then Received a Reward from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. | GAO-18-279

FWS and NOAA have reward policies that outline the general process for preparing reward proposals, but FWS's policy does not specify factors for its agents to consider when developing proposed reward amounts. Some FWS agents GAO interviewed said that in developing proposals, they did not know whether their proposed reward amounts were enough, too little, or too much. By augmenting its policy to specify factors for agents to consider, FWS can better ensure that its agents have the necessary quality information to prepare proposed reward amounts, consistent with federal internal control standards.

FWS and NOAA communicate little information to the public on rewards. For example, most agency websites did not indicate that providing information on wildlife trafficking could qualify for a reward. This is inconsistent with federal standards that call for management to communicate quality information so that external parties can help achieve agency objectives. FWS and NOAA officials said they have not communicated general reward information because of workload concerns, but they said it may be reasonable to provide more information in some instances. By developing plans to communicate more reward information to the public, the agencies can improve their chances of obtaining information on wildlife trafficking that they otherwise might not receive.

FWS and NOAA have not reviewed the effectiveness of their use of rewards. The agencies have not done so because using rewards has generally not been a priority. FWS and NOAA officials agreed that such a review would be worthwhile but provided no plans for doing so. By reviewing the effectiveness of their use of rewards, FWS and NOAA can identify opportunities to improve the usefulness of rewards as a tool for combating wildlife trafficking.