

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-561](#), a report to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Basin is one of the nation's largest watersheds and extends mainly through four Western states and into Canada. Activities such as power generation and agricultural practices have impaired water quality in some areas, so that human health is at risk and certain species, such as salmon, are threatened or extinct. In December 2016, Congress amended the Clean Water Act by adding Section 123, which requires EPA and OMB to take actions related to restoration efforts in the Basin.

GAO was asked to review restoration efforts in the Basin. This report examines (1) efforts to improve water quality in the Basin from fiscal years 2010 through 2016; (2) approaches to collaboration that entities have used for selected efforts; (3) sources of funding and federal funding expenditures; and (4) the extent to which EPA and OMB have implemented Clean Water Act Section 123. GAO reviewed documentation, including laws, policies, and budget information; surveyed federal, state, tribal, and nongovernmental entities that GAO determined had participated in restoration efforts; and conducted interviews with officials from most of these entities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations, including that EPA develop a program management plan for implementing the Columbia River Basin Restoration Program and that OMB compile and submit an interagency crosscut budget. EPA agreed with its recommendation. OMB did not comment, and GAO maintains its recommendations are valid.

View [GAO-18-561](#). For more information, contact Alfredo Gómez at (202) 512-3841 or gomezj@gao.gov.

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COLUMBIA RIVER BASIN

Additional Federal Actions Would Benefit Restoration Efforts

What GAO Found

Various entities, including federal and state agencies and tribes, implemented restoration efforts to improve water quality in the Columbia River Basin from fiscal years 2010 through 2016, according to GAO survey results.

Entities implemented a range of restoration efforts. Efforts included activities to improve surface water quality and restore and protect habitat. For example, the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho implemented projects on the Kootenai River to restore and maintain conditions that support all life stages of native fish.

Entities used various collaborative approaches. Entities' approaches to collaboration for selected water quality-related efforts in the Basin varied. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) sought various entities' voluntary involvement to coordinate toxics reduction efforts in the Basin.

Total federal expenditures could not be determined. Entities reported using a mix of federal and nonfederal funding sources for restoration efforts in the Basin, but total federal expenditures could not be determined, in part because there is no federal funding dedicated to restoring the Basin.

EPA and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) have not yet implemented Section 123. According to EPA officials, the agency has not yet taken steps to establish the Columbia River Basin Restoration Program, as required by the Clean Water Act Section 123. EPA officials told GAO they have not received dedicated funding appropriated for this purpose; however, EPA has not yet requested funding to implement the program or identified needed resources. By developing a program management plan that identifies actions and resources needed, EPA would have more reasonable assurance that it can establish the program in a timely manner. Also, an interagency crosscut budget has not been submitted. According to OMB officials, they have had internal conversations on the approach to develop the budget but have not requested information from agencies. A crosscut budget would help ensure Congress is better informed as it considers funding for Basin restoration efforts.

Map of the Columbia River Basin



Sources: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; Map Resources (state borders). | GAO-18-561