

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-104723](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. has recently experienced some of its worst wildfire seasons on record, creating unhealthy smoke that affected tens of millions of Americans. The 2018 *Fourth National Climate Assessment* projects that climate change will likely increase the frequency of large wildfires and worsen health effects from smoke.

EPA's mission is to protect human health and the environment. Managing risks to air quality and public health from wildfire smoke includes (1) ensuring communities can prepare for and respond to the risks, and (2) hazard mitigation to potentially reduce smoke risks from future fires.

GAO was asked to review issues related to the effects of wildfires on air quality and public health. This report examines, among other things, (1) EPA actions to manage risks to air quality and public health from wildfire smoke and to coordinate with other federal agencies, and (2) how EPA could better manage these risks.

GAO reviewed laws, regulations, and other documents; interviewed federal officials and 15 stakeholder entities, including tribal, state, and local agencies; and analyzed actions to reduce risks using criteria, including GAO's *Disaster Resilience Framework*.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations, including that (1) EPA develop a coordinated approach for its actions to manage wildfire smoke risks; and (2) EPA, USDA, and Interior align air quality and land management goals for wildfire risk mitigation. EPA, USDA, and Interior generally agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-23-104723](#). For more information, contact J. Alfredo Gómez at (202) 512-3841 or gomezj@gao.gov.

March 2023

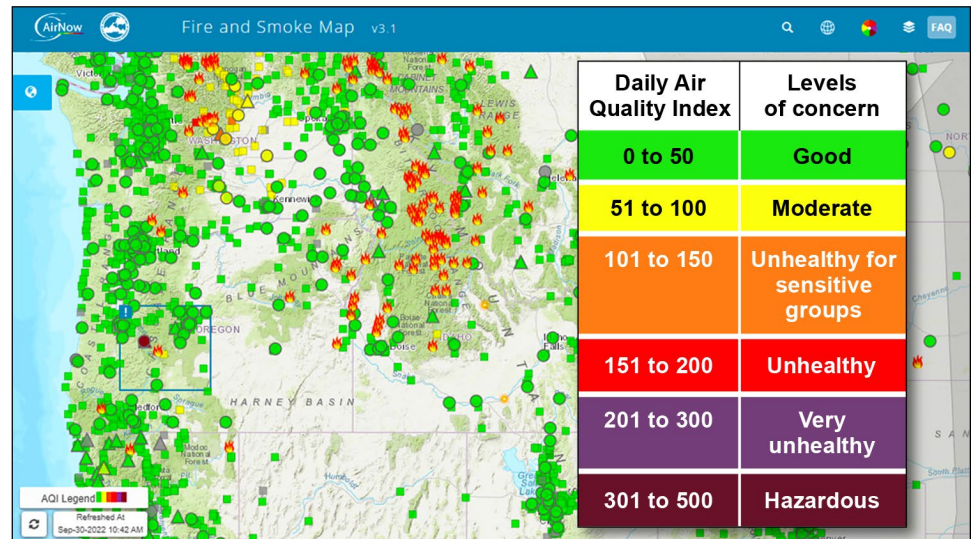
WILDFIRE SMOKE

Opportunities to Strengthen Federal Efforts to Manage Growing Risks

What GAO Found

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has partnered with other agencies to provide a range of information and tools to help communities prepare for and respond to wildfire smoke events. For example, EPA partnered with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Forest Service to develop an online map that shows near real-time air quality data, along with the locations of wildfires and where smoke is traveling.

Fire and Smoke Map, Showing Air Quality Information, Fire Locations, and Smoke Coverage



Source: fire.airnow.gov. | GAO-23-104723

GAO identified opportunities for EPA to better manage the growing risks from wildfire smoke by building on its actions to help communities prepare for and respond to wildfire smoke events. In particular, EPA could take a more coordinated approach to its actions that aligns with leading practices for collaboration. EPA's actions are spread across program and regional offices and conducted in an ad hoc manner with no dedicated program or budget. By developing a coordinated approach to guide these actions, EPA could better ensure that the agency directs limited resources toward its highest priorities.

EPA also has opportunities to enhance its role in supporting hazard mitigation through methods to reduce the likelihood of catastrophic wildfires and resulting smoke events. For example, EPA could work with federal land management agencies—the Forest Service and agencies within the Department of the Interior—to strengthen federal coordination. EPA and the land management agencies have identified areas where their respective agency missions and goals for wildfire risk mitigation are not aligned. For example, land management agency officials said that EPA's air quality requirements can limit the use of certain land-management methods, such as prescribed burns, that have the potential to reduce smoke from future wildfires. By better aligning their goals for wildfire risk mitigation, the federal agencies can more effectively reduce risks to air quality and public health from wildfire smoke over the long term.