

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105292](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government obligates hundreds of millions of dollars annually to respond to wildfires. Use of contracts can play a key role in the immediate aftermath of a disaster and in community recovery.

The Additional Supplemental Appropriations for Disaster Relief Act, 2019, included provisions for GAO to review issues related to major disasters, including wildfires. For wildfire-related contracts at selected agencies, this report examines (1) contract obligations from fiscal years 2018 through 2021 (the most recent available); (2) contracting approaches; and (3) the extent to which selected agencies collected, shared, and applied contracting lessons learned.

GAO analyzed contracting data from FEMA, BLM, and the Forest Service—agencies with key wildfire response and recovery responsibilities. From thousands of contract actions, GAO selected a non-generalizable sample of 14 contracts and 18 associated orders for review from these agencies based on factors such as total obligations. GAO also reviewed agency documentation and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations, including that BLM and Forest Service take steps to improve ordering official policies and their implementation; and that Forest Service develop mechanisms to archive and track lessons learned. All agencies concurred with our recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105292](#). For more information, contact Marie A. Mak at (202) 512-4841 or MakM@gao.gov.

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DISASTER CONTRACTING

Action Needed to Improve Agencies' Use of Contracts for Wildfire Response and Recovery

What GAO Found

While federal agencies may provide direct support for disaster response and recovery, including for wildfires, they may also enter into contracts to obtain life-saving goods and services from the private sector. GAO's analysis of agencies' contracting data found that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) collectively obligated at least a total of \$2 billion for wildfire response and recovery from fiscal years 2018 through 2021.

Aircraft Dropping Fire Retardant on a Wildfire



Source: RCK/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-23-105292

To mobilize goods and services quickly, the three selected agencies GAO studied used multiple approaches. For example, they used indefinite delivery contracts and assigned ordering officials, who can be authorized to place certain orders on behalf of the government. However, GAO found, for the orders reviewed, that BLM and Forest Service's use of ordering officials did not always align with their respective agency policies. For example, four of six BLM orders GAO reviewed exceeded the \$25,000 ordering limit specified in policy. The cumulative values of these orders ranged from \$900,000 to \$2.1 million. BLM has since taken steps that will address the issues GAO identified for these orders, but has not yet updated all of its related policies.

Each of the selected agencies had processes in place for collecting lessons learned. For example, all three agencies have panels or forums that allow for discussion of contracting issues and conduct wildfire reviews resulting in reports that may cover contracting challenges. However, GAO found that the Forest Service has not yet established mechanisms to archive and track implementation of all lessons learned identified during these reviews. Without doing so, the Forest Service may miss opportunities to leverage and apply knowledge gained from lessons learned to future response efforts.