

4. Health, Safety, and Maintenance

Each year, more than 500 million people visit the Department's National parks and monuments, wildlife refuges, and recreational sites. The Department is responsible for serving these visitors and maintaining and protecting thousands of facilities and millions of acres of property. In some cases, the isolation of Department lands and facilities presents vulnerabilities and makes safety and maintenance challenging. Our work has documented decades of maintenance, health, and safety issues that place the Department's employees and the public at risk.

Aircraft

In February 2009, we issued a flash report discussing U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) use of eight Department-owned aircraft. For more than a decade, the Department has allowed these aircraft to be flown over maximum takeoff gross weight according to Federal Aviation Administration regulations and manufacturer specifications. FWS acknowledged the risks, and has taken steps to purchase replacement aircraft.

Deferred Maintenance

The Department is responsible for roads, bridges, schools, office buildings, irrigation systems, and reservoirs for which repair and maintenance have been postponed because of budgetary constraints. The Department's FY 2010 estimate to correct deferred maintenance, the Department's term for unfunded repair and maintenance needs, ranges from \$13.0 billion to \$19.2 billion. Deterioration of assets because of uncorrected deferred maintenance poses health and safety hazards.

Abandoned Mines

Land managed by the Department has posed hazards to the public. Many abandoned mines, primarily in western states, pose dangerous safety and environmental hazards. In a July 2008 report, the OIG reported grave concerns to the Department regarding its failure to mitigate the hazards posed by abandoned mines on Federal lands. As stated in our report, "Mines located primarily in the Western States of California, Arizona, and Nevada have dangerously dilapidated structures, serious environmental hazards, and gaping cavities — some capable of swallowing an entire vehicle." The Department concurred and has implemented two of the report's three recommendations.

Our May 2009 report on Mining Claimant Administration addressed how the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) might be more effective in working with claim holders or claimants to mitigate the most serious physical safety hazards. BLM is missing opportunities to enhance public safety by neither coordinating with claimants nor actively seeking claimant assistance in mitigating the hazards. Six of the ten report recommendations have been implemented, and the Department is continuing to address the remaining issues.