

6. Resource Protection and Restoration

The Department's resource managers face the challenging task of balancing competing interests for the use and protection of the Nation's natural resources. The Department manages one-fifth of U.S. land, including 391 National park units and 548 wildlife refuges. BLM is the Nation's largest land manager with responsibility for 258 million acres of land across the West, as well as a 700 million acre onshore, subsurface mineral estate.

Wildland Fire Management

Interior's ability to mitigate the threat of wildfire and its associated cost is of concern. The Department recently transferred wildland fire management from BLM to the Office of Wildland Fire Coordination in an effort to focus attention on controlling the threat of wildland fires and its escalating costs. Congressional interest in wildland fire is at an all-time high. As recently as March 2009, the GAO stated that wildfire problems facing the Nation continue to grow and identified findings in funding and cost control. To address these concerns, the Department completed a number of corrective actions and stated that it was developing a comprehensive fire management "Cohesive Strategy," consistent with recent GAO recommendations. This strategy is expected to be completed by the end of 2011.

In response to concerns express by the Congress and OMB, the OIG assessed the Department's accountability through its wildland fire management programs to determine whether or not adequate funding guidance and oversight had been provided to help wildland urban interface areas take advantage of existing federal resources, specifically National Fire Plan grants, to reduce fire risks. The Department's four fire agencies – BLM, NPS, FWS, and the BIA – spend approximately one billion dollars annually to reduce wildland fire damages. Even so, the Department's wildland fire management programs received the lowest rating possible from OMB's Performance Assessment Rating Tool: "Results Not Demonstrated." The Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management and Budget concurred with the report's four recommendations.

Roads Program

At the request of the Congress, OIG evaluated the Department's roads programs at BIA, NPS, FWS, BLM, and the Bureau of Reclamation. These five bureaus manage approximately 186,713 miles of roads that are designated for either public or administrative use. The Department of the Interior and the Department of Transportation jointly manage three programs through the use of memoranda of agreement. Our February 2010 report concluded that each bureau was responsible for framing its own roads programs and that Interior exercises no centralized oversight of roads program activities within the bureaus. For example, BIA and BLM have the two largest road programs with respect to mileage, but do not have adequate inventories. Further, neither BIA nor BLM exercise sufficient oversight to ensure that roads funds are being properly managed and used for intended purposes. The resulting decentralization has led to a number of inconsistencies and has adversely affected program transparency and efficiency, funds accountability, and, most importantly, public safety. The Department subsequently agreed to establish a position to provide oversight of the different roads programs.

Museum Collections

Our December 2009 report on the museum collections found that the Department is failing to fulfill its stewardship responsibilities over museum collections second in size only to the Smithsonian Institution. The Department manages collections that are estimated to include over 146 million items of artwork, artifacts, and other museum objects at 625 Department facilities and at least 1,020 non-Departmental facilities. Specifically, we found widespread failure to properly execute the three key processes required to maintain accountability over museum collections: accessioning, cataloging, and inventorying.

These widespread accountability issues are largely due to poor program management, ineffective oversight, poor reporting, and an insufficient allocation of resources. Many of these problems have been documented since 1990. Although the Department developed agency-wide standards for managing museum collections, bureaus are not following that guidance. Establishing accountability over these museum collections has not been a priority for the Department. As a result, collections are unavailable for research, education, or display and are subject to theft, deterioration, and damage. We also found that the Department needs to take additional steps to improve preservation practices over its museum collection. Because preservation of collections has been neglected, countless artwork, artifacts, and other museum objects are in jeopardy. The Department is in the process of implementing the report's 13 recommendations for corrective action.