How GAO Helps the U.S. Congress Oversee Climate Change Policy

INTOSAI Working Group on Environmental Auditing

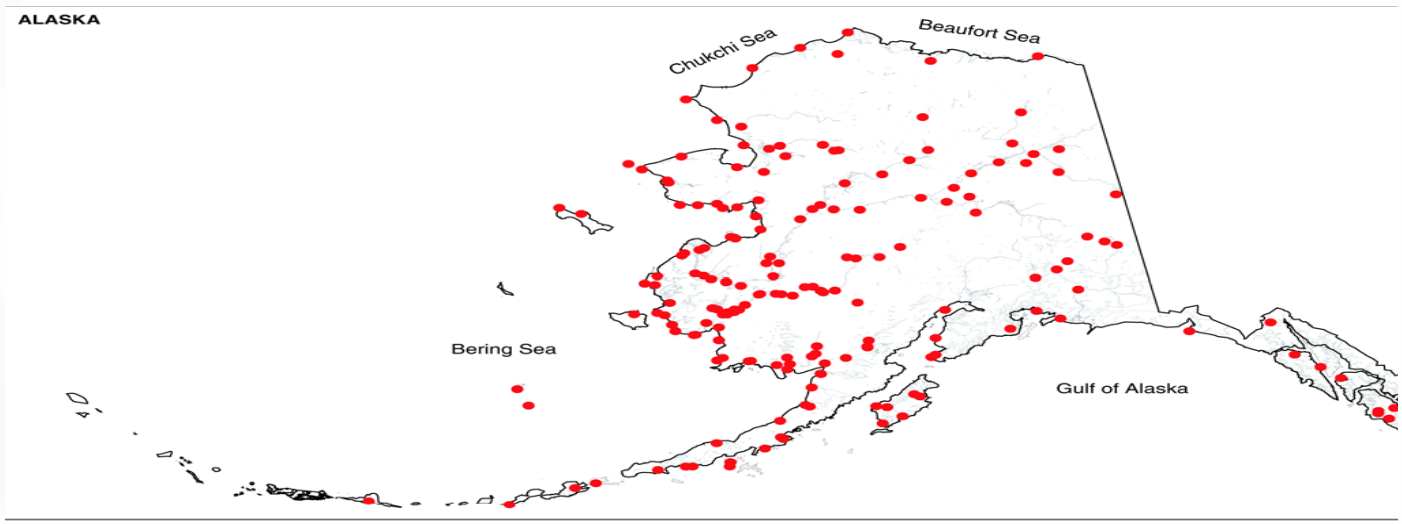
Moscow, Russian Federation – October 2005

Background

- We serve the U.S. Congress in various ways on a wide range of issues
  - Gather and analyze information
  - Evaluate polices and programs
- Climate change as an issue
  - Controversial and widely debated
  - Warming trend is widely acknowledged, although latest U.S. poll shows 4 in 10 doubt the climate is changing
  - What, if anything, to do remains contentious
- Our climate change work emphasizes two areas
  - Assessing the effects of climate change
  - Analyzing U.S. policies and programs
- Our work achieves results

Assessing the effects: Flooding and erosion in Alaska

- **Context**
  - Most Alaskan Native villages are located along the coastline and riverbanks



Sources: GAO (analysis); Meridian GeoSystems, Inc., (map).

Assessing the effects: Flooding and erosion in Alaska

Our December 2003 findings

- Flooding and erosion have affected 86 percent of villages
- Coastal villages are becoming more susceptible due to warming
- Many villages do not qualify for assistance with flooding and erosion control projects

Results

- Congress relaxed requirement for villages to share costs of flooding and erosion projects
- Local investment policies will explicitly consider environmental threats

Assessing the effects: Mandatory report on effects

- **Context**
  - A 1990 act requires the Administration to report on climate change
    - Reports must be prepared at least every 4 years
    - Reports must assess the effects of climate change on eight specified areas, including the natural environment and human health
  - Last report was issued in November 2000

- **Our April 2005 findings**
  - Administration was due to report by November 2004, but did not report; instead, it plans to issue a series of reports between 2005 and 2007.
  - Administration's plans did not make clear how it would address all eight required assessment areas

- **Results**
  - Administration said it would seek more time to prepare future reports
  - Administration modified the scope of the planned reports to cover all eight required areas

Assessing the effects: Climate change and federal lands

- **Context**
  - Hundreds of federal lands—national parks, national forests, national seashores, wildlife refuges, etc.—are managed by various agencies
  - There is concern about possible effects of climate change on these lands
- **Objective of ongoing engagement**
  - What are the potential effects of climate change on lands managed by the federal government?
- **Challenges**
  - Selecting lands to study
  - Identifying appropriate studies

Assessing the effects: Climate change and insurance costs

- **Context**
  - The U.S. Government spends large sums to reimburse individuals and businesses for weather-related losses
  - There is a concern that climate change may increase the losses
  - This request was received before Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck the United States

- **Objectives of new request**
  - Which U.S. government agencies incur weather-related losses?
  - To what extent are the U.S. government and private insurance companies exposed financially as a result of global warming?

- **Challenges**
  - Detailed data may not be available for all key agencies
  - Data may not be consistent between agencies

Analyzing policies and programs: Administration's 2002 initiative

- **Context**
  - Administration's Global Climate Change Initiative announced in 2002
  - Focused on reducing "emissions intensity" of U.S. economy
  - Initiative comprised of 30 elements

- **Our October 2003 findings**
  - Administration specified a general objective, but no rationale for specific emissions intensity target
  - Administration did not provide expected results for all 30 elements
  - Administration did not plan to check progress until 2012

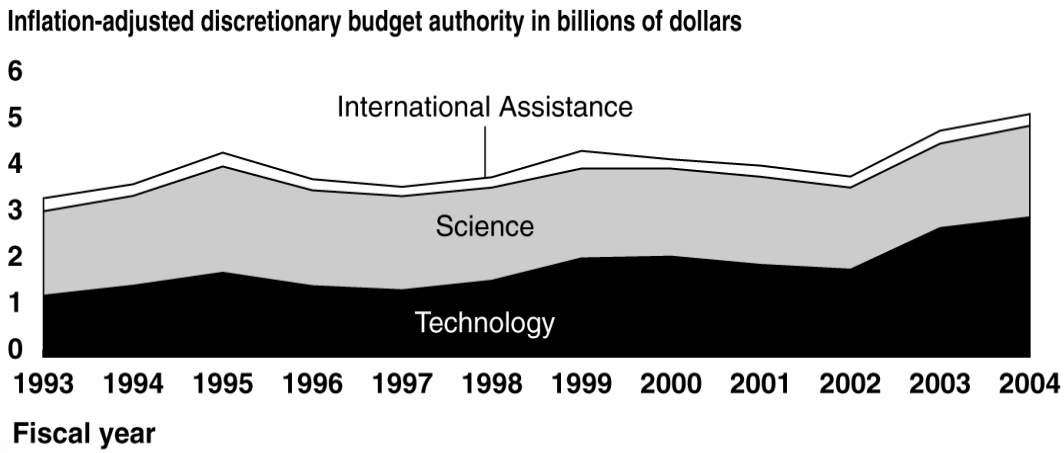
- **Results**
  - Because of scope limits, we made no recommendations

Analyzing policies and programs: Climate change funding

- **Context**
  - Congress requires preparation of an annual report on federal climate change funding
- **Our August 2005 findings**
  - Total reported funding increased substantially between 1993 and 2004, even after adjusting for inflation
  - However, because of changes over time in reports' content and format, it is unclear whether funding increased as much as reported
  - Share of spending for technology increased, while shares for science and international assistance decreased (see chart on next page).
- **Results**
  - Administration agreed to explain changes in content and format of future reports

Analyzing policies and programs: Climate change funding

Reported Federal Climate Change Funding by Category, 1993-2004



Source: GAO analysis of OMB data.

Analyzing policies and programs: New voluntary programs

- **Context**
  - Two new programs ask participants to commit to reduce emissions by a specific amount
  - Reductions may be stated in terms of total emissions or emissions intensity

- **Objectives of ongoing engagement**
  - How do federal agencies work with participants to make commitments and what commitments have been made?
  - What program milestones are in place and how do the agencies track participants' progress in meeting these milestones?
  - What are the agencies' estimates of the programs' current and future impact, and how do the agencies ensure the reliability of data on reported reductions?

Bibliography

- Selected GAO products on climate change, in order cited (all are available at www.gao.gov)

  - *Alaska Native Villages: Most Are Affected by Flooding and Erosion, but Few Quality for Federal Assistance*, GAO-04-142, December 12, 2003
  - *Climate Change Assessment: Administration Did Not Meet Reporting Deadline*, GAO-05-338R, April 14, 2005
  - *Climate Change: Preliminary Observations on the Administration's February 2002 Climate Initiative*, GAO-04-131T, October 1, 2003
  - *Climate Change: Federal Reports on Climate Change Funding Should Be Clearer and More Complete*, GAO-05-461, August 25, 2005