

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105547](#), a report to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The lakes, rivers, and other water bodies in the Lake Pontchartrain Basin support industry, provide habitat for plants and animals, and create recreational opportunities. However, stormwater, sewage, and agricultural runoff have polluted Basin waters for decades. To address these challenges, the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Restoration Act of 2000 called for EPA to establish the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Restoration Program to restore the ecological health of the Basin.

GAO was asked to review restoration efforts in the Basin. This report examines (1) restoration efforts since 1995, (2) EPA's implementation of relevant grants management requirements for its Lake Pontchartrain Basin Restoration Program, and (3) EPA's management of the program's performance.

GAO reviewed documents concerning Basin restoration efforts and the program; interviewed representatives from EPA, other federal agencies, state and local governments, a nonprofit, and recipients of program funding; and compared EPA's grants and performance management of the program against leading practices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to EPA, including that EPA (1) make key grant program information publicly available in a central location, such as a website; and (2) update the program's comprehensive conservation and management plan to include performance measures. EPA agreed with the recommendations and highlighted steps it has begun taking and plans to take to address them.

View [GAO-23-105547](#). For more information, contact J. Alfredo Gómez at (202) 512-3841 or gomezj@gao.gov.

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LAKE PONTCHARTRAIN BASIN

Additional Transparency and Performance Management Could Improve EPA's Restoration Program

What GAO Found

Federal and nonfederal entities have made numerous efforts to restore the water quality and ecosystems in the Lake Pontchartrain Basin, which is an important water resource for communities in the region, including New Orleans and Baton Rouge, Louisiana. For example, through the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Restoration Program authorized in 2000, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has awarded about \$31 million to administer and implement projects through this program. Such projects have included improving local sewer systems and monitoring water quality. In addition, the state of Louisiana's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority has completed numerous Basin restoration projects, such as reconstructing shoreline marsh (see fig.).

Bayou Bonfouca Marsh Creation Project



Sources: Providence Engineering and Environmental Group LLC and Duplantier Design Group, PC (2017) (left); Patrick Quigley (2016) (right). | GAO-23-105547

EPA has generally followed agency- and government-wide grants management regulations, policies, and procedures in managing Lake Pontchartrain Basin Restoration Program grants. For example, consistent with agency policy, EPA has reviewed grant recipients' quality assurance project plans and conducted annual programmatic reviews. However, EPA has not always ensured transparency by providing potential applicants with key grant information—such as expected funding levels and timelines—needed to make decisions about their grant applications. GAO has previously reported that complete information about grants should be publicly available. Unless EPA improves the availability of key grant information to make it publicly accessible in a central location, the agency will not be able to adequately communicate information that potential applicants need to apply effectively for grants.

EPA has taken initial actions to manage the performance of the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Restoration Program. For example, the agency defined the mission and desired outcomes of the program by approving a comprehensive conservation and management plan as a guiding document. This plan describes broad goals and the types of projects that may help reach these goals, but it does not include performance measures for measuring progress. For example, the plan includes a goal to reduce sewage pollution in the Basin and identifies projects that may assist in meeting this goal, but it does not include performance measures to determine progress made in reducing sewage pollution. Without developing and using performance measures, EPA will not be positioned to know if the program is achieving the desired results.