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WATER QUALITY

Improved Standards Can Better Target Efforts to Clean Up America's Waters

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Why GAO Undertook This Audit

- Federal EPA and the 50 states are currently charged with cleaning up over 20,000 polluted waters.
 - With EPA assistance, states develop “water quality standards” that determine which waters are polluted.
 - As such, the standards are critical in determining which waters are targeted for cleanup.
 - **KEY ISSUE: Are the standards accurate—and therefore are the right waters being targeted?**
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Background Information

Water Quality Standards are comprised of 2 key components:

- Designated Uses—Uses assigned to bodies of water (such as drinking water, recreation, aquatic life support)
- Pollutant Concentration Limits—Specify the limits needed to protect the designated uses (usually the maximum allowable concentration of a pollutant)



Background Information

- To develop pollutant concentration limits for a particular designated use, states rely on EPA-developed “criteria documents” containing recommended limits.
- States may:
 - Use the limits in the EPA criteria document;
 - Modify the EPA limits to meet their own needs;
- States compare monitoring data with the limits.
- If limits are exceeded, state must implement a plan to reduce pollution.



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Audit Questions

- **Question #1:** To what extent are states changing designated uses when necessary to ensure their accuracy?
 - As a related matter, how well is EPA assisting the states toward this end?
- **Question #2:** How far has EPA progressed in updating the “criteria documents” states use to develop pollutant concentration limits?
 - How well has EPA provided other assistance states need to develop accurate water quality standards?



Audit Methodology

- *To gather state information and perspectives:* Fifty state survey using the World Wide Web and contacts with key associations representing states' interests.
- *To gather federal information and perspectives:* Interviews with EPA headquarters and regional officials.
- *To obtain more detailed insights into how the program works:* Comprehensive site visits to Kansas, Montana, and Ohio.



Key Audit Findings

Issue #1: States' Efforts to Change Designated Uses When Necessary

- **The extent to which states changed their designated uses varied**—some made no use changes over a 5-year period, while others made over 1,000 changes.
- **Some necessary use changes were not made because of states' uncertainty** over the circumstances in which changes would be acceptable to EPA.
- **States overwhelmingly cited a need for EPA clarification** as to when a designated use change is acceptable and the type of documentation needed to support that change.
- **GAO made recommendations to EPA** to help ensure that the designated uses in place provide a valid basis for deciding which waters should be targeted for cleanup.



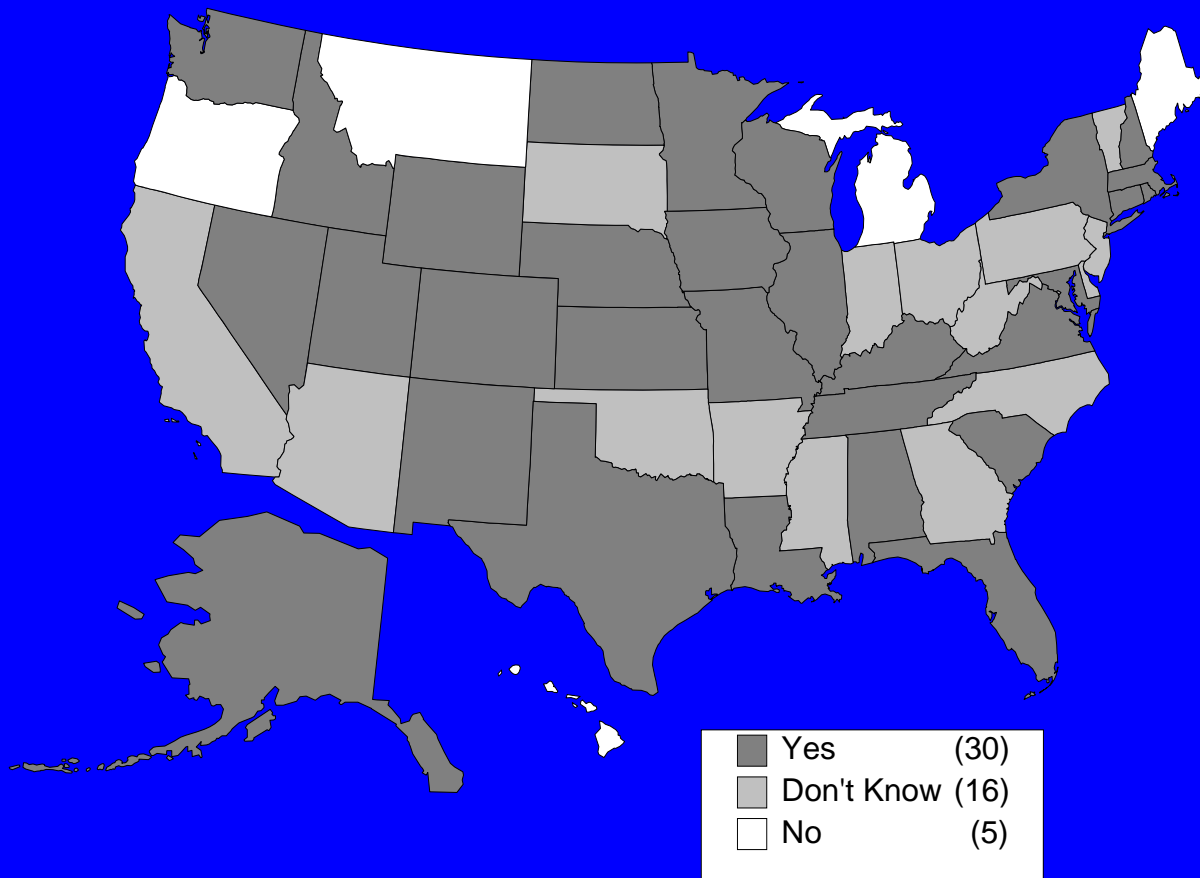
Key Audit Findings

Issue #2: EPA Criteria Documents and State Efforts to Develop Pollutant Limits

- **EPA has not developed criteria documents** for the pollutants causing the nation's most common water problems.
- **States have had difficulty changing their pollutant limits** when necessary; inconsistency in how EPA's regional offices approve such changes was cited as a major problem.
- **GAO made a number of recommendations** to EPA to help improve the states' abilities to set and modify pollutant limits so that they're more effective in targeting waters for cleanup.



Critical Question: Would Different Waters Be Targeted for Cleanup If Standards Were More Accurate?





Outcome of Audit

- Favorable reaction from states
- EPA indicates it plans to implement recommendations
- Committee of the House of Representatives held a formal hearing on the report's findings.



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Other Lessons: Cooperation Needed to Address Waters Crossing Political Boundaries

