



Highlights of GAO-06-96, a report to congressional requesters

## CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

# Improved Strategies Are Needed to Better Assess, Report, and Manage Restoration Progress

### Why GAO Did This Study

The Chesapeake Bay Program (Bay Program) was created in 1983 when Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, the District of Columbia, the Chesapeake Bay Commission, and EPA agreed to establish a partnership to restore the Chesapeake Bay. Their most recent agreement, *Chesapeake 2000*, sets out an agenda and five broad goals to guide these efforts through 2010 and contains 102 commitments that the partners agreed to accomplish. GAO was asked to examine (1) the extent to which appropriate measures for assessing restoration progress have been established, (2) the extent to which current reporting mechanisms clearly and accurately describe the bay's overall health, (3) how much funding was provided for the effort for fiscal years 1995 through 2004, and (4) how effectively the effort is being coordinated and managed.

### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Administrator of EPA instruct the Chesapeake Bay Program Office to (1) complete its efforts to develop and implement an integrated assessment approach; (2) revise its reporting approach to improve the effectiveness and credibility of its reports; and (3) develop a comprehensive, coordinated implementation strategy that takes into account available resources. In commenting on this report, the signatories to the *Chesapeake 2000* agreement generally agreed with GAO's recommendations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-96](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-96).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Anu Mittal at (202) 512-3841 or [mittala@gao.gov](mailto:mittala@gao.gov).

### What GAO Found

The Bay Program has over 100 measures to assess progress toward meeting certain restoration commitments and providing information to guide management decisions. However, the program has not yet developed an integrated approach that would allow it to translate these individual measures into an assessment of overall progress toward achieving the five broad restoration goals outlined in *Chesapeake 2000*. For example, while the Bay Program has appropriate measures to track crab, oyster, and rockfish populations, it does not have an approach for integrating the results of these measures to assess progress toward the agreement's goal of protecting and restoring the bay's living resources. The Bay Program has recognized that it may need an integrated approach for assessing overall progress in restoring the bay and, in November 2004, a task force began working on this effort.

The *State of the Chesapeake Bay* reports are the Bay Program's primary mechanism for reporting the current health status of the bay. However, these reports do not effectively communicate the bay's current conditions because they focus on the status of individual species or pollutants instead of providing information on a core set of ecosystem characteristics. Moreover, the credibility of these reports has been negatively impacted because the program has commingled various kinds of data such as monitoring data, results of program actions, and the results of its predictive model without clearly distinguishing among them. As a result, the public cannot easily determine whether the health of the bay is improving or not. Moreover, the lack of independence in the Bay Program's reporting process has led to negative trends being downplayed and a rosier picture of the bay's health being reported than may have been warranted. The program has recognized that improvements are needed and is developing new reporting formats.

From fiscal years 1995 through 2004, the restoration effort received about \$3.7 billion in direct funding from 11 key federal agencies; the states of Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia; and the District of Columbia. These funds were used for activities that supported water quality protection and restoration, sound land use, vital habitat protection and restoration, living resource protection and restoration, and stewardship and community engagement. During this time period, the restoration effort also received an additional \$1.9 billion in indirect funding.

The Bay Program does not have a comprehensive, coordinated implementation strategy to better enable it to achieve the goals outlined in *Chesapeake 2000*. Although the program has adopted 10 key commitments to focus partners' efforts and developed plans to achieve them, some of these plans are inconsistent with each other or are perceived as unachievable by program partners. The limited assurances about the availability of resources beyond the short term further complicate the Bay Program's ability to effectively coordinate restoration efforts and strategically manage its resources.