

SDG 14 on Life below Water: Auditing Marine Environment

Mark Gaffigan
Managing Director
Natural Resources & Environment
U.S. GAO

U.S. GAO and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The U.S. GAO, like other SAIs, makes valuable contributions to national efforts to track progress, monitor implementation, and identify improvement opportunities across the full set of the SDGs and their nations' sustainable development efforts. Although GAO has not been asked to conduct audits specifically focused on the status of SDG implementation, the agency has issued reports that address key aspects of all 17 SDGs across a broad range of government programs.

In fiscal year 2021, GAO issued a variety of products addressing all 17 UN SDGs. In total, GAO issued 383 products that addressed SDGs, representing 68 percent (383 of 563) of the total products issued that year

GAO issued the most work related to SDG 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, 107 products), and SDG 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, 96 products)

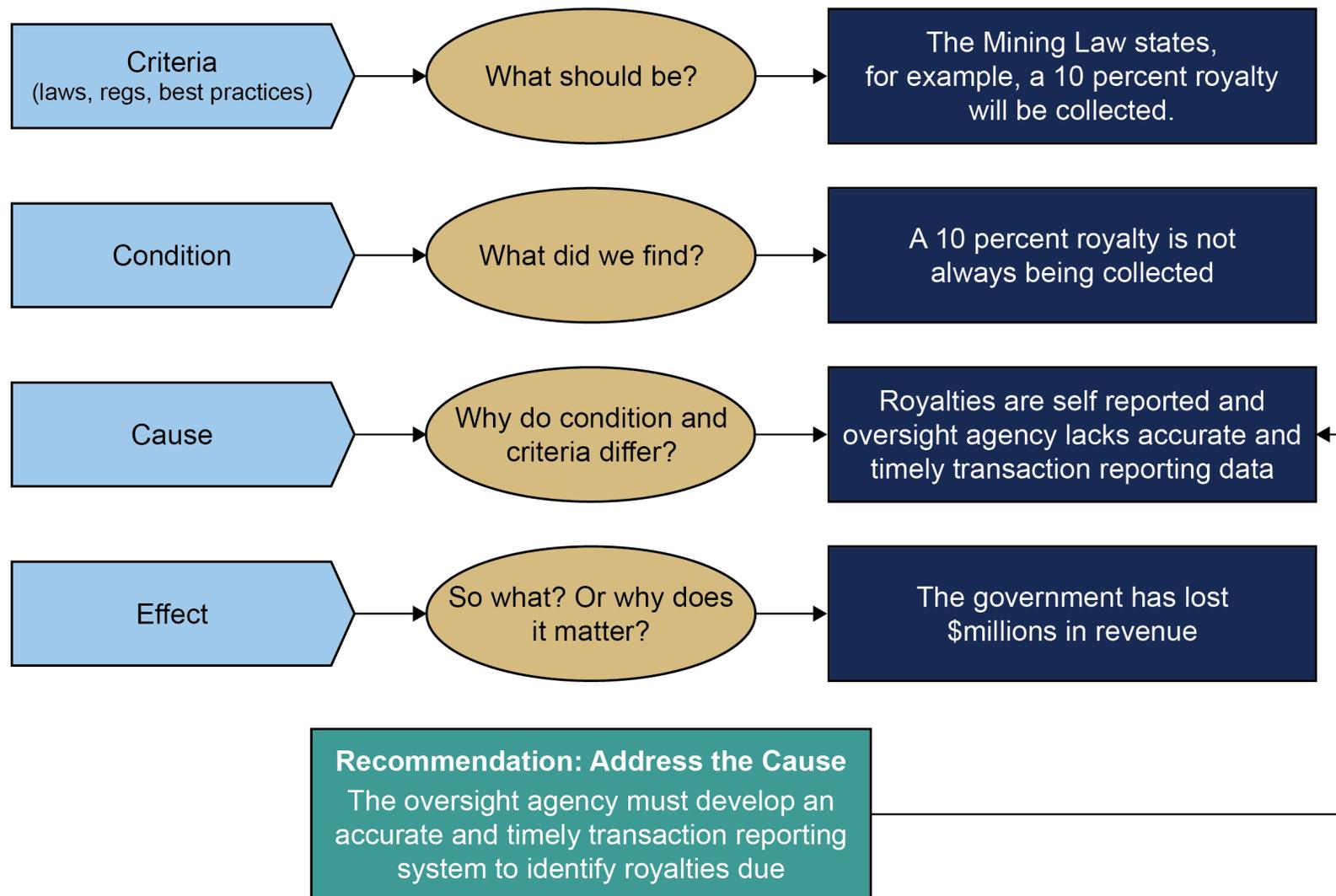
This presentation will summarize three examples of GAO reports related to SDG 14 (Marine Environment)

SDG 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

Examples of GAO reports related to 3 targets under SDG 14:

- **Target 14.1:** by 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, particularly from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution
- **Target 14.3:** minimize and address the impacts of ocean acidification, including through enhanced scientific cooperation at all levels
- **Target 14.4:** by 2020, effectively regulate harvesting, and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans, to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics

Performance Audits: Elements of a Finding



SDG Target 14.1: Prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds

Oil & Gas Pipeline Oversight & Decommissioning

The U.S. offshore oil and gas industry has installed thousands of miles of oil and gas pipelines in federal offshore waters since the 1940s. Aging pipelines are susceptible to damage from corrosion, mudslides, and seafloor erosion, which can result in leakage of oil and gas. Hurricanes can move pipelines extensive distances, damaging subsea habitat, impeding access to sediment resources, and creating navigational and trawling hazards.



Oil & Gas Pipelines

Criteria:

The Department of the Interior's (Interior) Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) is responsible for enforcing standards and regulations for oil and gas operations—including the oversight of active pipelines and their decommissioning—to enhance environmental protection and safety.

Cause:

The bureau's regulations are outdated and do not address how pipelines should be inspected, the complexities of deep water pipeline operations, and changes in technological standards. Going back to 2007, BSEE has long recognized the need to update its pipeline regulations but has made limited progress in updating its regulations.

Effect:

BSEE's outdated regulations limit its ability to ensure environmental protection and safety from the risks posed by thousands of miles of both active and decommissioned pipelines.

Condition:

BSEE does not have a robust oversight process for the approximately 8,600 miles of active offshore oil and gas pipelines located on the seafloor of the Gulf of Mexico. BSEE partnered with industry to improve subsea leak detection, but the technologies identified remain relatively new and cannot be retrofitted to a majority of pipelines. Regarding decommissioned pipelines, they are generally to be removed from the seafloor after their active service with exceptions allowed. However, in practice, over 97% (about 18,000 miles) of all decommissioned pipeline on the Gulf of Mexico seafloor since the 1960s has been allowed to remain in place. This high rate indicates that this is not an exception, but rather that decommissioning-in-place has been the norm. We found that BSEE does not have a robust process to address the environmental and safety risks posed by leaving decommissioned pipelines in place. For example, BSEE does not inspect pipelines after their decommissioning to ensure they are clean, nor monitor the condition and location of pipelines in case of movement. And if pipelines decommissioned-in-place are later found to pose risks, there is no funding source for removal.

Recommendation:

The BSEE Director should take actions to further develop, finalize, and implement updated pipeline regulations to address long-standing limitations regarding its ability to (1) ensure the integrity of active offshore oil and gas pipelines and (2) address safety and environmental risks associated with their decommissioning.

Impact: BSEE agreed with the GAO recommendation and is working to update its regulations through the rulemaking process

SDG Target 14.3: Ocean Acidification

Efforts to share Ocean Acidification Information

Oceans are increasingly absorbing more carbon dioxide which is resulting in chemical changes in oceans, including a decrease in the *ph* (more acidic) of surface ocean waters and a reduction in minerals needed by marine organisms to build shells. Collectively referred to as ocean acidification, these chemical changes pose risks to marine species and ecosystems, as well as human communities that rely upon them for food and commerce.



Source: © Nina Bednaršek. | GAO-14-736

Ocean Acidification

Criteria:

In 2009, the US passed the Federal Ocean Acidification Research and Monitoring Act (FOARAM) which, among other things, called for an interagency working group of different federal agencies to work together to take various actions related to ocean acidification, including establishing an ocean acidification information exchange.

Cause:

FOARAM did not define the characteristics of the information exchange including who was to undertake the responsibility of establishing the information exchange. The chair of the interagency working group recognized the value of the exchange but said that it was a lower priority than other needed actions, such as developing a research and monitoring plan.

Condition:

GAO found that the Subcommittee on Ocean Science and Technology-an entity within the Executive Office of the President-had not established an ocean acidification information exchange, as directed to by FOARAM.

Effect:

We reported that such an exchange could be a single web-based portal where information on ocean acidification is made available to government officials, researchers, and the public. Without such an exchange, researchers and the public may have difficulty in accessing all of the information on ocean acidification that federal agencies are developing.

Recommendation:

GAO recommended that appropriate entities within the Executive Office of the President, in consultation with the agencies in the interagency working group, establish an ocean acidification information exchange.

Impact:

Based in part on our recommendation, an ocean acidification information exchange website was released in February 2018. The website includes sections related to different geographic regions and to different topics. It also includes links to individual agencies and programs involved in ocean acidification and to data repositories. This information may help government officials, researchers, and the public identify relevant information and connect them to those involved in specific issues.

SDG Target 14.4: IUU Fishing

U.S. partnership with other nations to build capacity

Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing undermines the economic and environmental sustainability of fisheries and fish stocks, both in the U.S. and globally. Global illicit trade in catches from IUU fishing causes losses of up to 50 billion dollars annually from legitimate markets. The sustainability of global fishery resources continues to decline, having dropped from 90 percent in 1974 to 65.8 percent in 2017.



IUU Fishing

Criteria:

According to the Maritime SAFE Act, it is the policy of the U.S. to, among other things, (1) develop holistic diplomatic, military, law enforcement, economic, and capacity-building tools to counter IUU fishing, and (2) promote global maritime security through improved capacity and technological assistance to support improved maritime domain awareness.

Condition:

Among many efforts, the U.S. partners with other nations through Department of Defense (DOD)-led at-sea exercises designed to help them build maritime security capacity, which can contribute to partner nation capacity to address IUU fishing in their territorial waters as well as IUU fishing committed by their flagged vessels on the high seas. U.S. previously worked with African partner nations under Operation Junction Rain, however the final operation took place in 2019.

Cause:

In 2019, legal counsel for U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) and the Office of the Secretary of Defense determined that AFRICOM no longer had the authority to expend funds needed to conduct Operation Junction Rain. DOD officials told us that, as of June 2021, they still did not believe they have sufficient authority to conduct this operation.

Effect:

According to the DOD, the ability of African partner nations to enforce their laws at sea directly affects their economic and food security and national stability, which has significant impacts on U.S. national security and those of U.S. partners and allies. Operation Junction Rain yielded significant results in developing African partner nations' capacity to strengthen fisheries law enforcement along their nearly 19,000 miles of coastline.

Recommendation:

We recommended that the Department of Defense should determine whether it has the authority to continue to conduct Operation Junction Rain and, if it determines it does not, seek the authority to do so

Impact:

April 2022, DOD sent us a letter stating that in consultation with AFRICOM and the Office of the General Counsel, it has concluded that the Department has existing authority to continue Operation Junction Rain. Thus, DOD is not limited from re-establishing this program and may do so in the future.

Summary Themes on SDGs and the role of SAIs

- SDGs are broad goals that require a whole of society approach through many different efforts that are all inter-related to the broader SDGs.
- SAIs already contribute to the follow up and review on many different efforts related to the SDGs in the normal course of their existing mandates and workload. It is an available resource for those interested in the follow up and review of SDGs.
- Key challenges in making progress under SDGs include successful collaboration, information sharing, and the ability to measure progress and adjust to make further progress.