

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-309](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Tens of thousands of American Indians and Alaska Natives do not have safe drinking water or wastewater disposal in their home—referred to as needs arising from a sanitation deficiency—at a higher percentage than the general population, according to IHS. Among other things, IHS assesses homes, either individually or by reviewing public water systems, to determine any deficiencies. Seven agencies, including IHS, EPA, and USDA, have programs that provide drinking water and wastewater infrastructure assistance to Indian tribes.

GAO was asked to review federal efforts to provide water infrastructure assistance to Indian tribes. This report examines, among other objectives, the extent to which selected federal agencies (1) identified tribes' drinking water and wastewater infrastructure needs and (2) funded tribal water infrastructure projects, including tribes' most severe sanitation deficiencies. GAO reviewed agency data on tribal needs, analyzed agency funding data for tribal water infrastructure projects, reviewed agency policy documents, and interviewed agency officials and officials from 22 tribes representing different geographic locations.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 16 recommendations, including that (1) IHS develop a way to indicate in its database if homes' deficiencies have been assessed and (2) IHS and USDA review and update project scoring processes. IHS agreed with these recommendations, and USDA proposed an approach for addressing the recommendation on scoring, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-18-309](#). For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell or J. Alfredo Gómez at (202) 512-3841 or [fennella@gao.gov](mailto:fennella@gao.gov) or [gomezj@gao.gov](mailto:gomezj@gao.gov).

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## DRINKING WATER AND WASTEWATER INFRASTRUCTURE

### Opportunities Exist to Enhance Federal Agency Needs Assessment and Coordination on Tribal Projects

#### What GAO Found

Federal agencies have identified several billion dollars in existing and future tribal drinking water and wastewater infrastructure needs. Specifically, the Indian Health Service (IHS) worked with tribes to identify, in fiscal year 2016, an estimated \$3.2 billion in water infrastructure projects to address existing sanitation deficiencies in Indian homes, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) identified an additional \$2.4 billion in future tribal drinking water infrastructure needs over the next 20 years. However, IHS could enhance the accuracy of its information about the water infrastructure needs of some Indian homes. In February 2018, the database that IHS uses to track Indian homes' sanitation deficiencies showed that about one-third of the homes (138,700) had no deficiency. However, because the database does not provide IHS with a way to record if a home's deficiency has been assessed, IHS could not determine whether these homes had no deficiency or if they had not yet been assessed to identify a deficiency. IHS officials stated that improving the database's accuracy would be beneficial. By implementing a way to indicate in its database whether these homes' deficiencies have been assessed, IHS could also more efficiently address any deficiencies in these homes.

Federal agencies provided about \$370 million for tribal drinking water and wastewater infrastructure projects in fiscal year 2016, including some projects to address what the agencies identified as the most severe sanitation deficiencies (i.e., communities that lack safe drinking water or wastewater disposal). IHS and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) policies direct the agencies to fund tribal projects that address these deficiencies. However, agency scoring processes may not always prioritize the projects that address them:

- IHS assigns points to projects using eight scoring factors, including sanitation deficiency and cost. Based on GAO's review of IHS documents and interviews with agency officials, IHS's process for selecting projects can discourage funding some projects that address the most severe sanitation deficiencies, especially those with a relatively high cost per home. As a result, some projects to serve homes without water infrastructure can remain unfunded for many years. IHS officials said the scoring factors balance a number of interests, and the agency is looking to improve the extent to which it funds projects that address these deficiencies.
- USDA uses a different set of scoring factors to assign points when evaluating project applications for its tribal water program, including rural population and income levels. However, USDA does not have a scoring factor to assign points to a project based on whether it will serve homes that lack safe drinking water or wastewater disposal, as it does with another program with similar goals. Instead, USDA officials said they use discretionary points to score projects on this basis, but these points may not be awarded at all. As a result, USDA may not have reasonable assurance that it consistently evaluates project applications in a way that aligns with agency policy to fund projects that address the most severe sanitation deficiencies.

By IHS reviewing and USDA updating their scoring processes, the agencies could have more assurance that the projects they fund address the most severe sanitation deficiencies in Indian communities.