As part of the Government Accountability Office (GAO) portfolio of work on the performance and accountability of federal agencies with respect to sustainability, GAO evaluated the implementation of key green building requirements as directed by federal laws, executive orders and other policies. The report examined the use of third-party certification, including the LEED green building rating system, in helping meet these standards. GAO’s report, titled Federal Green Building – Federal Efforts and Third-Party Certification Help Agencies Implement Key Requirements, But Challenges Remain, can be found here.

The study surveyed five agencies including the General Services Administration (GSA), Department of Energy (DOE) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), each of which have green building expertise and responsibilities related to federal guidelines for buildings, and the Veterans Administration (VA), Air Force and U.S. Army, as building owners and users. GAO did not make any recommendations to improve performance or evaluation or use of green building rating systems by the federal agencies.

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS:

All five agencies utilize LEED in their current policies related to new construction and major renovations. Additionally, officials from all five select agencies (DOE, EPA, GSA, VA, Air Force, and Army) reported to GAO that third-party certification helps ensure compliance with key building requirements by holding contractors and agency project teams accountable for incorporating the requirements.1

According to GSA, project teams can meet nearly 80 percent of key requirements by obtaining LEED for Existing Buildings: Operations & Maintenance.

BACKGROUND:

The federal government is one of the nation’s largest energy consumers, spending approximately $7 billion in FY 2014 to provide energy to more than 270,000 buildings.2 Federal guidelines known as the Guiding Principles established by executive orders in 2007, 2009 and later codified by Congress set out to achieve gains in five key areas of sustainability: employ integrated design principles, optimize energy performance, protect and conserve water, enhance indoor environmental quality, and reduce the environmental impact of materials.

On March 19, President Obama issued Executive Order 13693, calling for the Council on Environmental Quality to revise the Guiding Principles and extend time frames for implementing key requirements in existing buildings.

GAO reported agency comments on how LEED is used to support federal efforts, including reducing costs, promoting accountability, and providing a framework.

PROMOTES ACCOUNTABILITY

LEED keeps contractors and agency project teams compliant and accountable. According to GAO, agencies stated that through a carefully managed, independent third-party verification system, LEED affirms the integrity of green building commitments by ensuring design plans and goals are being met.3

PROVIDES A FRAMEWORK

LEED provides a well-established, industry recognized framework that is familiar to contractors and building designers. LEED is consistently used to communicate common sustainability efforts between agencies, contractors, staff and the public.4

SAVES MONEY AND RESOURCES

2 GAO-15-667, Page 1
3 GAO-15-667, Page 17
4 GAO-15-667, Page 20
LEED reduces the need for additional agency staff and resources when implementing federal green building requirements, allowing them to focus on their core mission.\(^5\)

According to GSA officials, third-party certification accounts for an average of just .012 percent of total project costs.\(^6\) The renovations to the historic 50 United Nations Plaza Federal Office Building in San Francisco, California, which received LEED Platinum certification, is estimated to achieve annual energy savings of 59 percent compared with similar buildings, resulting in projected annual savings of $393,958.\(^7\)

With more than 1,500 LEED-certified projects encompassing more than 156 million square feet, the federal government is leading by example in encouraging green building. Click here for more information on how government at all levels use LEED to save taxpayer money and demonstrate strong environmental stewardship.

**WHAT IS GAO:**

As described by GAO, its mission is to support the investigative arm of Congress in meeting its constitutional responsibilities and to help improve the performance and accountability of the federal government for the American people. GAO examines the use of public funds; evaluates federal programs and policies; and provides analysis, recommendations, and other assistance to help Congress make informed oversight, policy, and funding decisions. GAO’s commitment to good government is reflected in its core values of accountability, integrity, and reliability.

\(^5\) GAO-15-667, Page 21
\(^6\) GAO-15-667, Page 22
\(^7\) GAO-15-667, Page 29