

Reports of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development to the Parliament of Canada

Supporting Species at Risk Assessment and Reassessment— Environment and Climate Change Canada

Report 9



**Independent Auditor's
Report | 2024**



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of Canada

Bureau du
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At a Glance



Overall message

Overall, Environment and Climate Change Canada is falling short of providing the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada the support it needs to complete planned status assessments and timely reassessments of species at risk under the [Species at Risk Act](#).

Status assessments determine whether species are at risk. They are the essential first step in the *Species at Risk Act* process to protect, manage, and recover species at risk of disappearance in Canada. Environment and Climate Change Canada is required to provide the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada with the financial, administrative, and technical support it needs to carry out this work. We did not audit the operations or processes of this independent committee itself but rather the department's support of the committee. The department limited its support to 60 assessments and reassessments in 2023–24—without a formal analysis to demonstrate why the target was chosen—and it still did not provide the support necessary to complete the 60 as targeted. With a target of 60 assessments and reassessments per year, it would take almost 30 years for the committee to assess the species currently prioritized and over a century to assess those that are potentially at risk. Further, the target makes it impossible for the committee to keep up with reassessments, which are required for every species at risk every 10 years under the act.

Given the scale of the globally recognized biodiversity crisis, the current rate of assessments and reassessments negatively affects Canada's ability to protect wildlife species from disappearing because of human activity.

Key facts and findings



- Canada is home to an estimated 80,000 species, and over 5,000 species are potentially at risk at the national level. The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada has prioritized over 1,000 species for status assessments.
- Environment and Climate Change Canada reduced the number of species status assessments and reassessments it planned to support annually, from 80 in 2021–22 to 75 in 2022–23 and to 60 in 2023–24. In all cases, these targets were not met.
- The backlog of species needing reassessment will grow from 389 to 574 by the end of 2030 at the current target.
- If species are not reassessed within the 10-year time frame required under the *Species at Risk Act*, Canadians and parliamentarians may not know whether a species' status has improved, remained the same, or declined and whether recovery actions for a species may need to change or funding be reallocated to other species in need.

See [Recommendations and Responses](#) at the end of this report.

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Introduction

Why we did the audit

9.1 The United Nations recognizes biodiversity loss as one of the world's most pressing emergencies. According to the United Nations, globally, species are going extinct tens to hundreds of times faster than the rate before humans became primary contributors to extinction. A 2024 Policy Horizons Canada report identified biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse as one of the most likely and high-impact events that could disrupt Canadian society in the next decade. In Canada, biodiversity loss could have cascading impacts on all living things and on basic human needs such as clean air, water, and food.

9.2 Canada is home to an estimated 80,000 species, including mammals, birds, fish, plants, amphibians, reptiles, and insects. More than 300 Canadian species do not exist anywhere else in the world. Some of Canada's species that were once commonly found, such as the plains bison and the monarch butterfly, have declined drastically to the point that they are at risk of disappearance. The passenger pigeon was once North America's most common bird but is now globally extinct. Protecting biodiversity in Canada is a joint effort that requires the collaboration of many parties, including federal, provincial, and territorial governments.

9.3 Canada has committed internationally to taking urgent action to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030 under the Convention on Biological Diversity and to preventing the extinction of threatened species under the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. The [Species at Risk Act](#) received royal assent in 2002 to complement existing legislation and to contribute to meeting Canada's international commitments by providing legal protection for species at risk. The *Species at Risk Act* is intended to

- prevent wildlife species from being extirpated or becoming extinct
- recover species identified as extirpated, endangered, and threatened because of human activity
- manage species of special concern to prevent them from becoming endangered or threatened ([Exhibit 9.1](#))

Exhibit 9.1—Classifications of wildlife species at risk under the *Species at Risk Act*

Species at risk classification	Description
Extirpated	A wildlife species that no longer exists in the wild in Canada, but exists elsewhere in the wild.
Endangered	A wildlife species that is facing imminent extirpation or extinction.
Threatened	A wildlife species that is likely to become an endangered species if nothing is done to reverse the factors leading to its extirpation or extinction.
Special concern	A wildlife species that may become a threatened or an endangered species because of a combination of biological characteristics and identified threats.

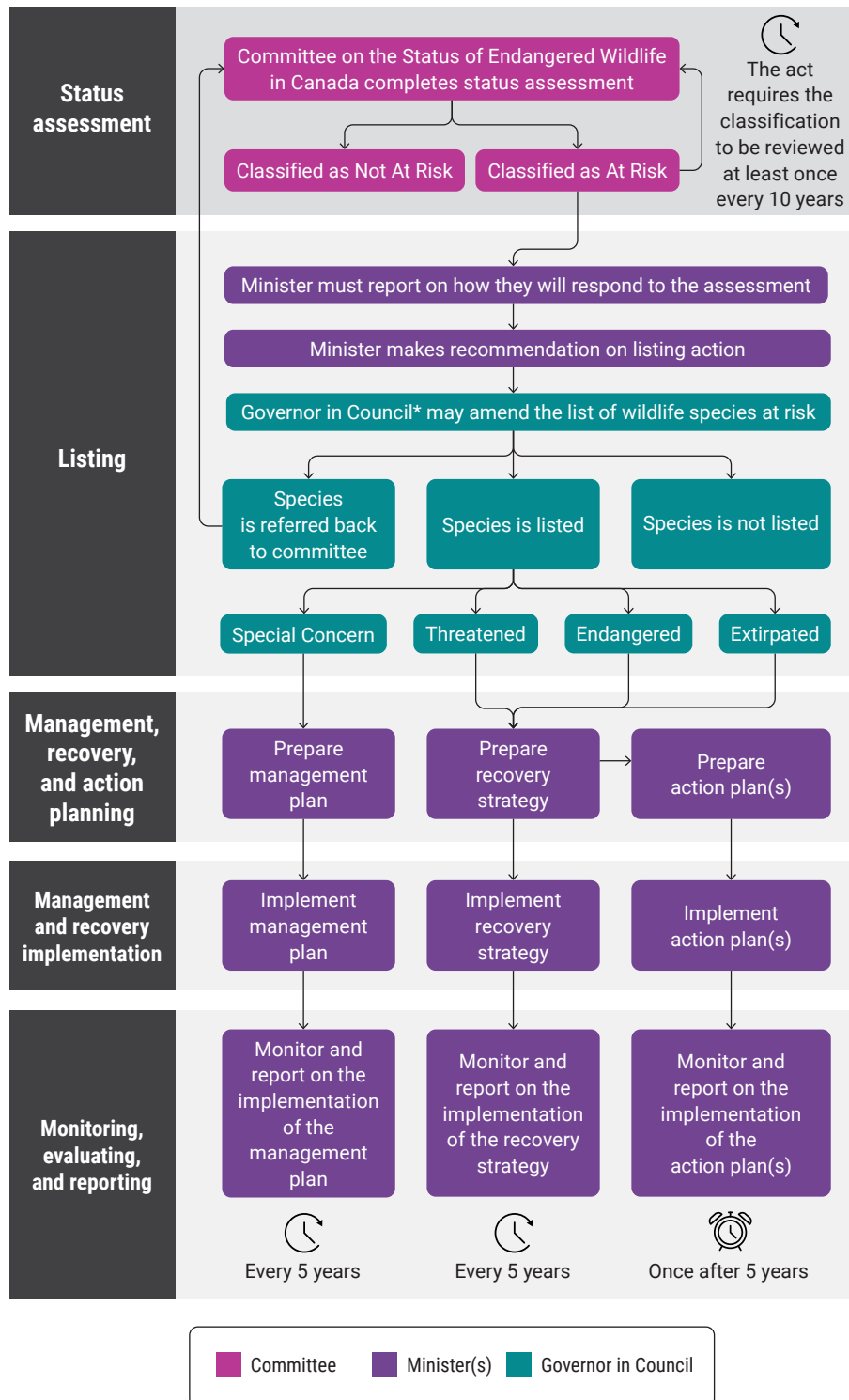
Source: *Species at Risk Act*

Assessing the status of species at risk

9.4 Species status assessments are the first step in the process for protecting and recovering species at risk under the *Species at Risk Act*. Species are not normally eligible to be listed or to receive protection under the act unless they are assessed first. Under the act, these assessments are completed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, an independent committee that provides advice to the Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

9.5 The committee conducts status assessments of wildlife species, which under the act can include species, subspecies, and distinct populations. The committee and its subcommittees prioritize species potentially at risk, and then the committee assesses and classifies them into risk categories. The committee provides these assessments to the minister for the next steps in the *Species at Risk Act* process ([Exhibit 9.2](#)).

Exhibit 9.2—Elements of the *Species at Risk Act* process



* Governor in Council—The Governor General, who acts on the advice of Cabinet and, as the formal executive body, gives legal effect to those decisions of Cabinet that are to have the force of law.

Source: Based on information from the *Species at Risk Act*

Exhibit 9.2—Elements of the *Species at Risk Act* process—Text description

This flow chart shows the elements of the *Species at Risk Act* process. The main steps are as follows:

- status assessment
- listing
- management, recovery, and action planning
- management and recovery implementation
- monitoring, evaluating, and reporting

For the status assessment, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada completes a status assessment to classify the species as either at risk or not at risk. The act requires the classification to be reviewed at least once every 10 years.

For species classified as at risk, the minister must report on how they will respond to the assessment. Next, the minister makes a recommendation on a listing action. The Governor in Council may amend the list of wildlife species at risk. The Governor in Council is the Governor General, who acts on the advice of Cabinet and, as the formal executive body, gives legal effect to those decisions of Cabinet that are to have the force of law.

The Governor in Council can take 1 of 3 possible actions: refer the species back to committee, not list the species, or list the species.

If the species is listed, it is listed under 1 of the following 4 categories: special concern, threatened, endangered, or extirpated.

If a species is listed under “special concern,” the steps for the minister (or ministers) are as follows:

- During the management, recovery, and action planning phase, prepare a management plan.
- During the management and recovery implementation phase, implement a management plan.
- During the monitoring, evaluating, and reporting phase, monitor and report on the implementation of the management plan every 5 years.

If a species is listed under “threatened,” “endangered,” or “extirpated,” the steps for the minister (or ministers) are as follows:

- During the management, recovery, and action planning phase, prepare a recovery strategy and an action plan (or action plans).
- During the management and recovery implementation phase, implement the recovery strategy and action plan (or action plans).
- During the monitoring, evaluating, and reporting phase, monitor and report on the implementation of the recovery strategy and action plan (or action plans). A recovery strategy must be monitored and reported on every 5 years. An action plan must be monitored and reported on once after 5 years.

Source: Based on information from the *Species at Risk Act*

9.6 The act also requires the committee to review classifications of each species at risk at least once every 10 years after an assessment. This is currently done with reassessments, which determine whether the species’ status improved, further declined, or remained the same since its last assessment or reassessment. As the number of species assessed increases, the number of reassessments that must take place at least once every 10 years after also increases.

9.7 More than 60 members are appointed to the committee by the minister. Some of these members have other full-time jobs as wildlife biologists or Indigenous traditional knowledge experts in academia, non-governmental organizations, or the private sector. These members and a subcommittee of people with Indigenous traditional knowledge receive honoraria for their work. In addition, there are members from the federal, provincial, and territorial governments. Volunteer species specialists also provide expertise to the committee.

9.8 Funding support to the committee is provided by Environment and Climate Change Canada, primarily for the costs related to committee meetings, including travel and contracts for status assessment report preparation. During the 3 fiscal years in the scope of the audit, the funding support has ranged from approximately \$1.2 million to \$1.9 million.

9.9 Under the *Species at Risk Act*, the Minister of Environment and Climate Change is also required to report on the general status of wildlife species in Canada every 5 years. The most recent of these reports, *Wild Species 2020: The General Status of Species in Canada*, identified over 5,000 species potentially at risk at the national level. The general status report is a scan of as many species as possible and provides the most comprehensive inventory of species in Canada. The general status report may be used to inform the committee's work, and the committee's assessments provide focused and comprehensive analyses for individual wildlife species.

Who we audited

9.10 **Environment and Climate Change Canada.** Environment and Climate Change Canada is responsible for the administration of the *Species at Risk Act*. The department is also responsible for providing the necessary support to the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada so that it can carry out its functions. This support is provided through a secretariat for the committee, comprising scientific and administrative staff. This secretariat is responsible for

- providing and administering financial support for the committee's assessment process
- providing administrative and technical services to the committee members and subcommittees
- preparing work plans, with the Chair of the committee, based on the committee's priorities
- reviewing and approving the committee's budget
- disseminating information to the public

9.11 We did not audit the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. The committee is an independent, ministerially appointed body. The committee develops its own operations and procedures, which are supported by the secretariat.

What we audited

9.12 **Objective.** To determine whether Environment and Climate Change Canada met requirements so that status assessments and timely reassessments for species at risk were completed. In our audit, “requirements” refers to the department’s obligation to provide the committee with the support necessary to carry out its functions as outlined in the *Species at Risk Act*. The committee’s mandate is to assess the status of each wildlife species it considers to be at risk, and the act’s purpose is to prevent wildlife species from becoming extirpated or extinct because of human activity. “Timely reassessments” refers to the reviews of classification aligned with the 10-year timeline in the act.

9.13 **Why it matters.** This audit matters because there is an acknowledged global biodiversity crisis. If species status assessments do not take place, species may not be considered for protection or recovery actions under the act and could disappear. Furthermore, if the status of assessed species is not reassessed within the required 10-year time frame, Canadians and parliamentarians may not know whether efforts to protect species at risk are working or whether species are continuing to decline.

Findings and Recommendations

Environment and Climate Change Canada limited the number of species status assessments and reassessments being done

What we found

9.14 We found that while the department supported the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada to complete assessments each year, it limited the number of assessments and reassessments the committee could do. In the 2023–24 fiscal year, it limited the number of assessments and reassessments to a total of 60 even though the committee’s mandate is to assess the status of each wildlife species it considers to be at risk and the department is required to provide the committee with the support necessary to carry out this work.

9.15 Furthermore, due to factors both within and outside of the department's control, we found that the department did not provide the support necessary to complete the targeted number of 60 assessments and reassessments. Even if the department supported its target of 60 assessments and reassessments per year, we found it would take nearly 30 years for the committee to assess all species currently prioritized and decades more to assess all those that are potentially at risk.

9.16 The following observations support this finding:

- The department set targets for the number of assessments and reassessments it would support but did not have a formal analysis to justify this decision. [Read more.](#)
- The department did not support the targeted number of assessments and reassessments. [Read more.](#)

Why it matters

9.17 This finding matters because with a limited number of assessments, a species may become extirpated or extinct before it is even assessed and before actions are taken to protect and recover it. Further, a species could continue to decline, such that future recovery efforts could be more costly, or a species could disappear from Canada.

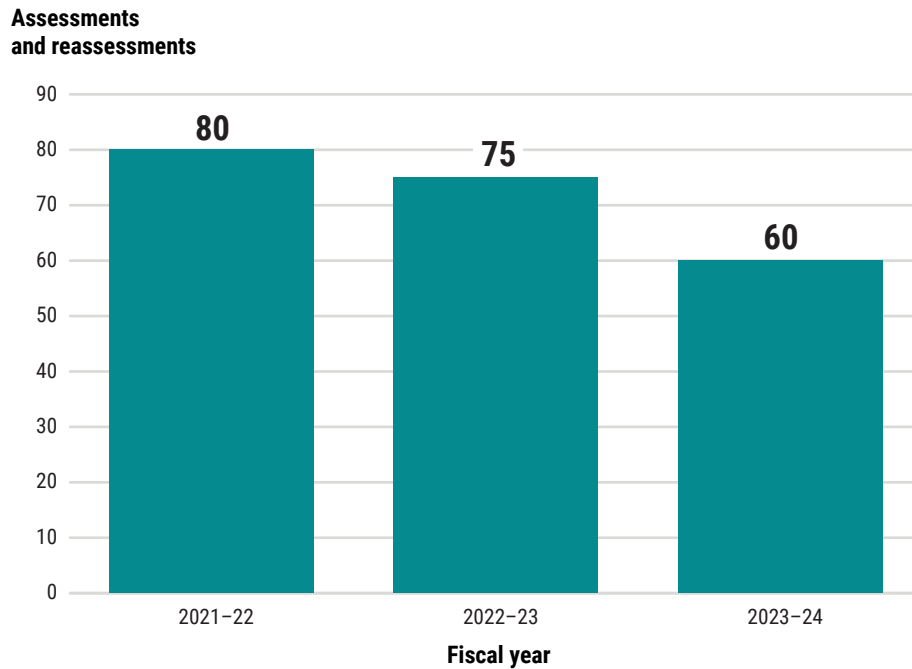
The department set targets for the number of assessments and reassessments it would support but did not have a formal analysis to justify this decision

Findings

9.18 Under the [Species at Risk Act](#), the committee is responsible for assessing the status of each wildlife species it considers to be at risk and determining when these species will be assessed. Environment and Climate Change Canada is required to provide the committee with the support necessary to carry out its functions.

9.19 We found that Environment and Climate Change Canada set targets for the number of assessments it would support each year of our audit period. These targets declined for each year under audit ([Exhibit 9.3](#)). The department further committed to a target of 60 assessments and reassessments in the year following our audit period, in the 2024–25 fiscal year.

Exhibit 9.3—The department’s targets for the number of assessments and reassessments it would support declined each year under audit



Source: Based on data from Environment and Climate Change Canada

Exhibit 9.3—The department’s targets for the number of assessments and reassessments it would support declined each year under audit—Text description

This chart shows the department’s targets for assessments and reassessments by fiscal year from 2021–22 to 2023–24. In 2021–22, the target was 80 assessments and reassessments. In 2022–23, the target was 75 assessments and reassessments. In 2023–24, the target was 60 assessments and reassessments.

Source: Based on data from Environment and Climate Change Canada

9.20 We found that Environment and Climate Change Canada did not undertake a formal analysis to justify its targets in the 3 years under audit, the decline each year, or the repercussions of its decisions given the act’s purpose to prevent species from disappearing. The department did not have any documentation to support or explain how it set the annual targets including why it reduced them each year of our audit period.

9.21 The committee and its subcommittees are responsible for developing lists of species considered priorities for assessment, among thousands of Canadian wildlife species potentially at risk. At the time of our audit, 1,062 species had been identified, 20 of which were highest priority to be assessed next. We found that at the current targeted level of departmental support for 60 assessments and reassessments per year, it would take nearly 30 years to complete 1,062 assessments.

9.22 We also found that given the current targeted level of support, it would take over 120 years to complete the assessments of more than 4,000 potentially at-risk species in Canada identified in the Wild Species 2020: The General Status of Species in Canada report that have not been assessed by the committee ([Exhibit 9.4](#)).

Exhibit 9.4—At the current level of departmental support, it would take nearly 30 years to assess all prioritized species, and over 120 years to assess all species identified as potentially at risk in Canada’s general status of species report



Note: Wild Species 2020: The General Status of Species in Canada identified over 5,000 species potentially at risk at the national level.

Source: United Nations and based on data from Environment and Climate Change Canada

Exhibit 9.4—At the current level of departmental support, it would take nearly 30 years to assess all prioritized species, and over 120 years to assess all species identified as potentially at risk in Canada’s general status of species report—Text description

This timeline shows the projected dates for assessing species at risk at the current level of departmental support and compares these dates with Canada’s commitments through the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

The end of the audit period is in 2024. Canada has committed to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030. Canada has committed to halt human-induced extinction of known threatened species by 2050. At the current level of departmental support, all prioritized species are projected to be assessed by 2054 and all potentially at-risk species are projected to be assessed by 2147.

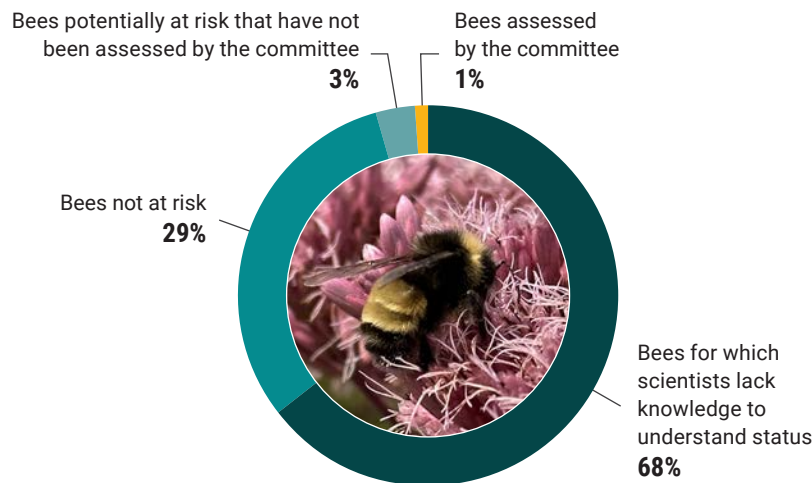
Note: Wild Species 2020: The General Status of Species in Canada identified over 5,000 species potentially at risk at the national level.

Source: United Nations and based on data from Environment and Climate Change Canada

9.23 Given Canada’s commitment to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030, it would take a pace of 152 new assessments per year to the end of 2030 to assess all the prioritized species and would require 630 per year to assess the thousands of potentially at-risk species in the general status of species report that have not been assessed by the committee.

9.24 Delays in assessments could have serious impacts for species. For example, bees are the most common pollinators in Canada and are critical to the production of many crops and plants for human and animal consumption. According to the 2020 general status of species report, there are 879 native bee species in Canada, with 31 species identified as potentially at risk. Of these bee species, 23 (3% of the 879 species) have not been assessed by the committee. In addition, there are over 500 more bees (68%) for which scientists currently lack knowledge to determine whether they are at risk ([Exhibit 9.5](#)).

Exhibit 9.5—Some native bee species that are potentially at risk had not been assessed



Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Based on data from Environment and Climate Change Canada and Wild Species 2020: The General Status of Species in Canada, Canadian Endangered Species Conservation Council, 2022

Photo: Carrie Klassen

Exhibit 9.5—Some native bee species that are potentially at risk had not been assessed—Text description

This donut chart shows the assessment statuses for native bee species. In the middle of the donut is a photo by Carrie Klassen of a yellow-banded bumble bee on a pink flower.

Of the native bee species in Canada, 29% of bee species are not at risk. The committee has assessed 1% of bee species and has not assessed 3% of bee species potentially at risk. Scientists lack sufficient knowledge to understand the status of 68% of bee species.

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

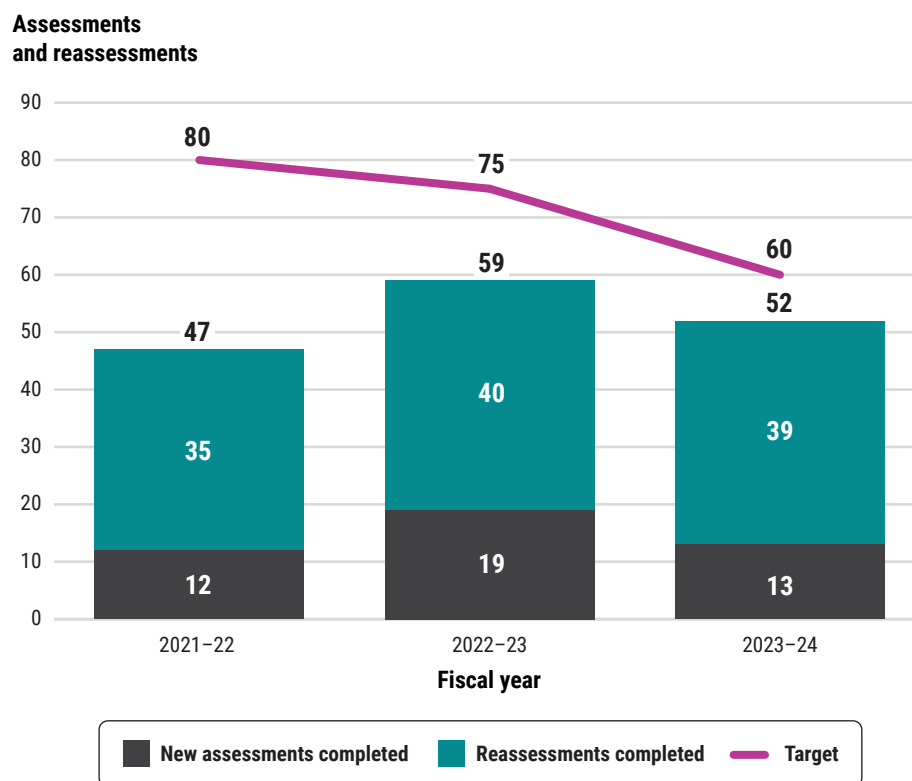
Source: Based on data from Environment and Climate Change Canada and Wild Species 2020: The General Status of Species in Canada, Canadian Endangered Species Conservation Council, 2022

The department did not support the targeted number of assessments and reassessments

Findings

9.25 We found that Environment and Climate Change Canada did not provide the support necessary to complete the targeted number of assessments and reassessments in the 3 fiscal years of our audit, from 2021–22 to 2023–24 ([Exhibit 9.6](#)).

Exhibit 9.6—The department’s target number for assessments and reassessments was not met for any of the years under audit



Source: Based on data from Environment and Climate Change Canada

Exhibit 9.6—The department’s target number for assessments and reassessments was not met for any of the years under audit—Text description

This chart shows the target for and actual number of assessments and reassessments by fiscal year from 2021–22 to 2023–24.

In 2021–22, 12 new assessments and 35 reassessments were completed, for a total of 47 assessments and reassessments. The target was 80 assessments and reassessments.

In 2022–23, 19 new assessments and 40 reassessments were completed, for a total of 59 assessments and reassessments. The target was 75 assessments and reassessments.

Exhibit 9.6—Text description continued

In 2023–24, 13 new assessments and 39 reassessments were completed, for a total of 52 assessments and reassessments. The target was 60 assessments and reassessments.

Source: Based on data from Environment and Climate Change Canada

9.26 We found that barriers to meeting targets included high workload for departmental staff and a lack of resources, including departmental staff vacancies and budget. We also found that in some cases, there were factors outside of the department’s control that contributed to missed targets. These included high workload for committee members, challenges in recruitment of members, impacts resulting from postponing assessments and reassessments during the COVID-19 pandemic, and delays in contractors’ preparation of status assessment reports. However, in our view, the department could have taken steps to mitigate some of these issues to allow for the completion of more assessments.

9.27 We found that the department did not measure or report whether its support to the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada was sufficient for the committee to fulfill its responsibilities under the act. We noted that on more than 1 occasion, the committee told the department it did not have the resources necessary to carry out its work. During the 2022–23 fiscal year, the committee requested additional funding support, but the department did not provide it.

Recommendation

9.28 As the critical first step to prevent extinction and extirpation of species at risk in Canada, Environment and Climate Change Canada should

- determine the appropriate annual targets for species status assessments, given the urgency of the biodiversity crisis and the need to meet Canada’s international commitments
- provide the support required for the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada to achieve those targets

The department’s response. *Agreed.*

See [Recommendations and Responses](#) at the end of this report for detailed responses.

Environment and Climate Change Canada was not supporting the timely reassessments of species at risk

What we found

9.29 We found that the department had not provided the support necessary for the committee to complete timely reassessments of species at risk. By the end of our audit period, nearly 400 species at risk were overdue for a reassessment. This backlog is expected to grow each year and, at the current target, will be at nearly 600 species by 2030. Although the department was aware of the backlog, it took limited action to support the committee in reducing it and preventing its further growth.

9.30 The following observations support this finding:

- The department took limited action to reduce the growing backlog of reassessments of species at risk. [Read more.](#)
- Timely reassessments were not completed, so the department lacked up-to-date information to report progress against national and international commitments. [Read more.](#)

Why it matters

9.31 This finding matters because reassessments allow Canadians and parliamentarians to understand whether Canada's efforts to recover species at risk are working or whether species are continuing to decline. Depending on whether its status has improved, remained the same, or declined, recovery actions for a species may need to change, or resources could be reallocated to other species in need. Canada also uses reassessments to report progress against national and international commitments.

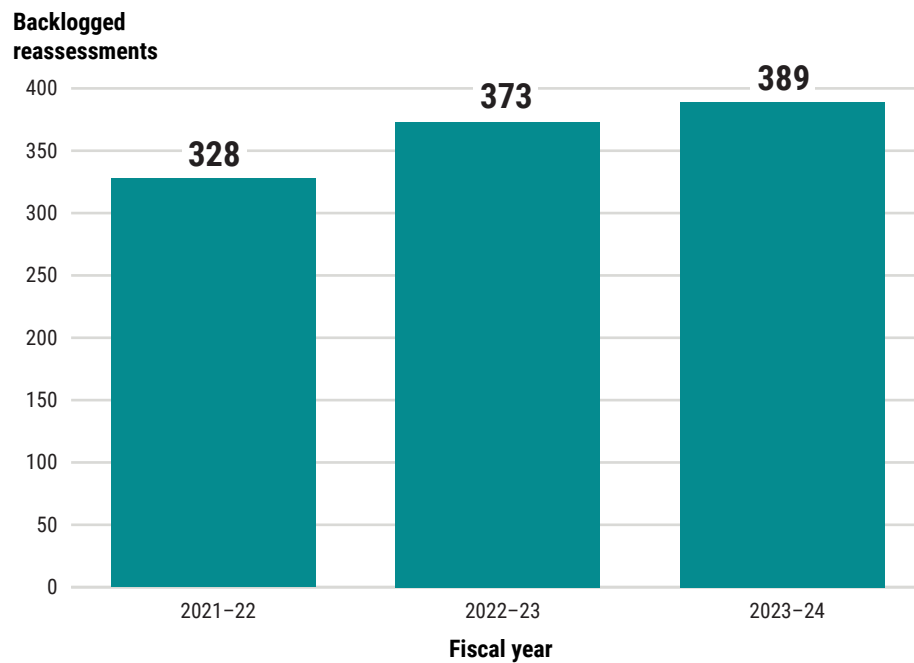
The department took limited action to reduce the growing backlog of reassessments of species at risk

Findings

9.32 Under the *Species at Risk Act*, the committee must review the classification of each species at risk at least once every 10 years or at any time if it has reason to believe that the status of the species has changed significantly. This is currently done with reassessments. Environment and Climate Change Canada is required to provide the committee with the financial, administrative, technical, and other support necessary to carry out its functions.

9.33 We found that by the end of our audit period, nearly 400 species at risk were overdue for a reassessment ([Exhibit 9.7](#)).

Exhibit 9.7—The backlog of species at risk that were overdue for reassessment increased each year under audit



Source: Based on data from Environment and Climate Change Canada

Exhibit 9.7—The backlog of species at risk that were overdue for reassessment increased each year under audit—Text description

This chart shows the number of species at risk that were overdue for reassessment by fiscal year from 2021-22 to 2023-24.

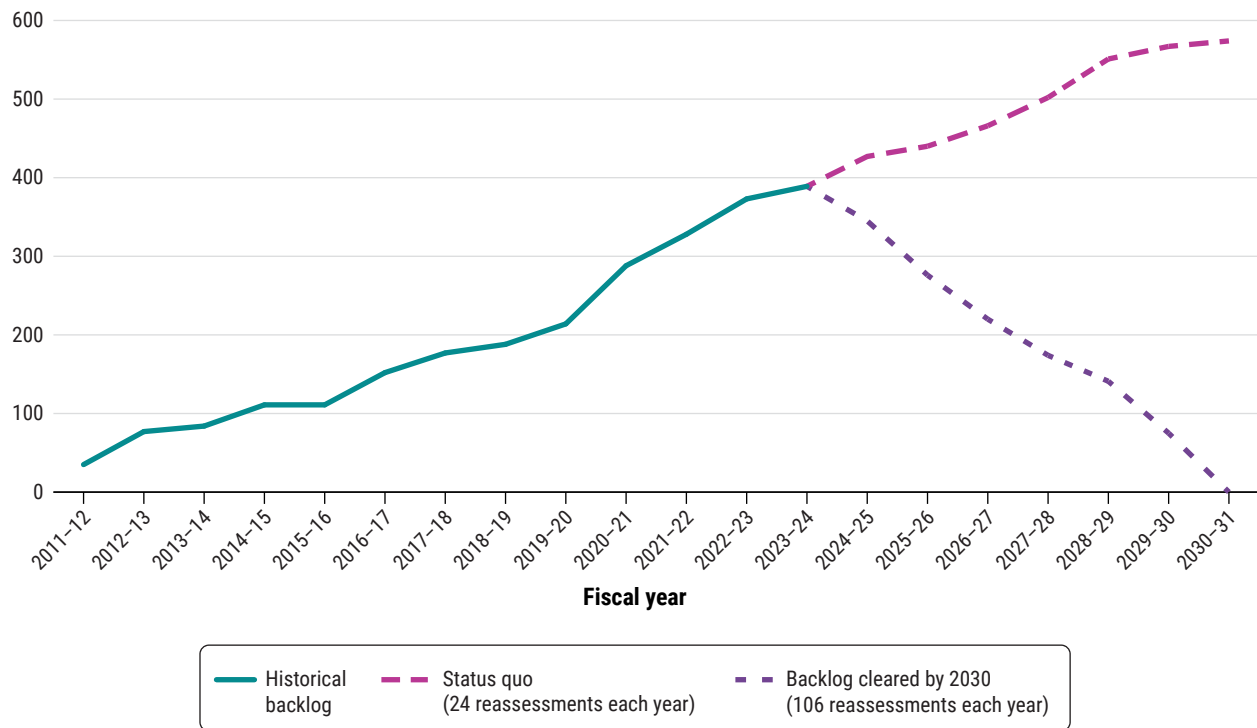
In 2021-22, there were 328 backlogged reassessments of species at risk. In 2022-23, there were 373 backlogged reassessments. In 2023-24, there were 389 backlogged reassessments.

Source: Based on data from Environment and Climate Change Canada

9.34 We found that this backlog of species overdue for a reassessment is expected to increase as additional species are assessed. Assuming the department supports its target of 60 assessments and reassessments each year, the backlog will grow to 574 species by the end of 2030. To reduce the backlog of reassessments to 0 in the same period, the department would have to support the committee to complete 106 species reassessments per year ([Exhibit 9.8](#)).

Exhibit 9.8—In a status quo scenario, the backlog of reassessments will continue to grow; 106 reassessments each year would have to be supported to eliminate the current backlog by 2030

Backlogged reassessments



Source: Based on data from Environment and Climate Change Canada

Exhibit 9.8—In a status quo scenario, the backlog of reassessments will continue to grow; 106 reassessments each year would have to be supported to eliminate the current backlog by 2030—Text description

This line graph shows the increase in the number of backlogged reassessments of species at risk from the 2011–12 to 2023–24 fiscal years. The graph then shows 2 different trajectories to the 2030–31 fiscal year:

- the projected increase to 574 of backlogged reassessments of species at risk if the status quo continues at 24 reassessments each year
- the projected decrease to 0 of backlogged reassessments of species at risk if 106 reassessments were completed each year

The historical backlog from 2011–12 to 2023–24 is as follows. In 2011–12, there were 35 backlogged reassessments of species at risk. In 2012–13, there were 77 backlogged reassessments. In 2013–14, there were 84 backlogged reassessments. In 2014–15, there were 111 backlogged reassessments. In 2015–16, there were 111 backlogged reassessments. In 2016–17, there were 152 backlogged reassessments. In 2017–18, there were 177 backlogged reassessments. In 2018–19, there were 188 backlogged reassessments. In 2019–20, there were 214 backlogged reassessments. In 2020–21, there were 288 backlogged reassessments. In 2021–22, there were 328 backlogged reassessments. In 2022–23, there were 373 backlogged reassessments. In 2023–24, there were 389 backlogged reassessments.

Exhibit 9.8—Text description continued

The projected backlog from 2024–25 to 2030–31 is as follows. In 2024–25, if the status quo (24 reassessments each year) continues, there would be 427 backlogged reassessments of species at risk. To clear the backlog by 2030 (106 reassessments each year), the number of backlogged reassessments of species at risk would drop to 345. In 2025–26, if the status quo continues, there would be 440 backlogged reassessments. To clear the backlog by 2030, the number of backlogged reassessments would drop to 276. In 2026–27, if the status quo continues, there would be 466 backlogged reassessments. To clear the backlog by 2030, the number of backlogged reassessments would drop to 220. In 2027–28, if the status quo continues, there would be 502 backlogged reassessments. To clear the backlog by 2030, the number of backlogged reassessments would drop to 174. In 2028–29, if the status quo continues, there would be 551 backlogged reassessments. To clear the backlog by 2030, the number of backlogged reassessments would drop to 141. In 2029–30, if the status quo continues, there would be 567 backlogged reassessments. To clear the backlog by 2030, the number of backlogged reassessments would drop to 75. In 2030–31, if the status quo continues, there would be 574 backlogged reassessments. To clear the backlog by 2030, the number of backlogged reassessments would drop to 0.

Source: Based on data from Environment and Climate Change Canada

9.35 We also found that within our audit period, most of the reassessments were not done within 10 years, as required by the *Species at Risk Act* ([Exhibit 9.9](#)). For example, in the 2023–24 fiscal year, 10 of the reassessments completed were between 15 and 20 years after a previous assessment, and 2 were more than 20 years after a previous assessment.

Exhibit 9.9—Most reassessments for species at risk were completed more than 10 years after a previous assessment

Fiscal year	Total reassessments completed*	Reassessments of species at risk that were completed more than 10 years after a previous assessment
2021–22	35	33
2022–23	40	39
2023–24	39	34

* Includes reassessments of species that were not previously at risk

Source: Based on data from Environment and Climate Change Canada.

9.36 The department is aware of the number of species at risk that are overdue for reassessment. We found that barriers to completing enough reassessments to reduce the backlog included high workload for departmental staff and a lack of resources, including departmental staff vacancies and budget. We also found that in some cases, there were factors outside of the department’s control that contributed to missed targets. These included high workload for committee members, challenges in recruitment of members, impacts resulting from postponing assessments and reassessments during the COVID-19 pandemic, and delays in contractors’ preparation of status assessment reports. However, in our view, the department could have taken steps to mitigate some of these issues to allow for the completion of more reassessments.

9.37 Beginning in 2022, the department supported a pilot project that would separate the review of classification process from the reassessment process. This differentiation could, in time, reduce the backlog of species overdue for a reassessment. By the end of our audit period, this pilot project was still ongoing and no decision had been made by the committee to adopt the new process.

Timely reassessments were not completed, so the department lacked up-to-date information to report progress against national and international commitments

Findings



Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss

Source: United Nations

9.38 Canada has committed internationally to protect and prevent the extinction of species at risk ([Exhibit 9.10](#)). In 2015, Canada adopted the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which included Sustainable Development Goal 15, which aims to halt biodiversity loss. In 2022, Canada signed the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which commits to taking urgent action to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030. Environment and Climate Change Canada has also been involved in setting and tracking national commitments for species at risk and for biodiversity, including through the federal sustainable development strategy and related departmental strategies. To report on its international and national commitments, Canada uses information from the committee’s reassessments to describe changes in the status of species at risk over time.

Exhibit 9.10—Examples of Canada’s national and international commitments related to the protection of species at risk or prevention of extinction, and the use of reassessment data to measure and report on performance

Source of commitment	Year Canada signed	Commitment	Reporting uses reassessment data
Aichi Biodiversity Targets, Convention on Biological Diversity, United Nations	2010	By 2020 the extinction of known threatened species has been prevented and their conservation status, particularly of those most in decline, has been improved and sustained.	Yes
United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	2015	Take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats, halt the loss of biodiversity and, by 2020, protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species.	Yes
2022–2026 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy	2022	By 2026, increase the percentage of species at risk listed under federal law that exhibit population trends that are consistent with recovery strategies and management plans to 60%, from a baseline of 42% in 2019.	Yes
Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, Convention on Biological Diversity, United Nations	2022	By 2030: Ensure urgent management actions to halt human induced extinction of known threatened species and for the recovery and conservation of species, in particular threatened species, to significantly reduce extinction risk. By 2050: Human induced extinction of known threatened species is halted, and, by 2050, the extinction rate and risk of all species are reduced tenfold and the abundance of native wild species is increased to healthy and resilient levels.	Not yet reported by Canada

Source: United Nations and Environment and Climate Change Canada

9.39 In 2018, in its last report to the Convention on Biological Diversity, Canada acknowledged that it does not have a complete understanding of the status of its species at risk. There are over 1,000 species in Canada prioritized by the committee and its subcommittees that have not yet been assessed and a growing number of species overdue for reassessments. Increasing the number of assessments and reassessments conducted would lead to improved accuracy of Canada’s reporting, due to increased data availability and more consistent, up-to-date information. For example, we found that in the last year of our audit period, clearing the backlog of species

overdue for a reassessment could have added as many as 278 species to Canada's international reporting on changes in the status of species at risk, increasing its scope by over 50%.

Recommendation

9.40 To improve Canadians' understanding of the status of species at risk, Environment and Climate Change Canada should develop and implement a plan to support the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada to eliminate in a timely way the backlog of species requiring review of classification and to prevent its future growth.

The department's response. *Agreed.*

See [Recommendations and Responses](#) at the end of this report for detailed responses.

Conclusion

9.41 We concluded that overall, Environment and Climate Change Canada had not provided the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada with the support necessary to complete all planned status assessments or timely reassessments for species at risk. The targets set by the department will neither address the known number of potentially at-risk species nor allow for timely reassessments.

About the Audit

This independent assurance report was prepared by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada on the species at risk assessment and reassessment capacity of Environment and Climate Change Canada. Our responsibility was to provide objective information, advice, and assurance to assist Parliament in its scrutiny of the government’s management of resources and programs and to conclude on whether the species at risk assessment and reassessment capacity of the department complied in all significant respects with the applicable criteria.

All work in this audit was performed to a reasonable level of assurance in accordance with the Canadian Standard on Assurance Engagements (CSAE) 3001—Direct Engagements, set out by the Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada (CPA Canada) in the CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance.

The Office of the Auditor General of Canada applies the Canadian Standard on Quality Management 1—Quality Management for Firms That Perform Audits or Reviews of Financial Statements, or Other Assurance or Related Services Engagements. This standard requires our office to design, implement, and operate a system of quality management, including policies or procedures regarding compliance with ethical requirements, professional standards, and applicable legal and regulatory requirements.

In conducting the audit work, we complied with the independence and other ethical requirements of the relevant rules of professional conduct applicable to the practice of public accounting in Canada, which are founded on fundamental principles of integrity, objectivity, professional competence and due care, confidentiality, and professional behaviour.

In accordance with our regular audit process, we obtained the following from entity management:

- confirmation of management’s responsibility for the subject under audit
- acknowledgement of the suitability of the criteria used in the audit
- confirmation that all known information that has been requested, or that could affect the findings or audit conclusion, has been provided
- confirmation that the audit report is factually accurate

Audit objective

The objective of this audit was to determine whether Environment and Climate Change Canada met requirements so that status assessments and timely reassessments for species at risk were completed.

Definitions

- **Requirements:** To provide the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada with the assistance necessary to carry out its functions (*Species at Risk Act*, section 20), given the committee's function to assess the status of each wildlife species it considers to be at risk (*Species at Risk Act*, subsection 15(1)(a)) and the act's purpose to prevent wildlife species from becoming extirpated or extinct as a result of human activity (*Species at Risk Act*, section 6).
- **Timely reassessments:** Reviews of classification aligned with the timelines in the *Species at Risk Act*, section 24.

Scope and approach

The audit team reviewed documentation related to species at risk assessments and reassessments from Environment and Climate Change Canada and conducted interviews with department officials. Although the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada was not the subject of this audit, the audit team interviewed current and former members of the committee to understand its work and processes.

We received data from the department on 6 February 2024 for all species status assessments and reassessments completed by the committee from the 1978–79 fiscal year to 5 February 2024. No additional wildlife species status assessments were completed from that date to the end of our audit period on 31 March 2024. This data set included 1,243 assessments and 1,105 reassessments. The audit team received source data for the original data set on 10 April 2024 and used this to perform data integrity testing. The team confirmed data reliability of this data by testing for accuracy and completeness.

The audit team used publicly available data:

- **Wild Species 2020: The General Status of Species in Canada**, Canadian Endangered Species Conservation Council, 2022, downloaded on 4 April 2024
- **Species specialist subcommittees' candidate list**, current to 17 April 2024

Modelling and assumptions: The audit team projected 4 scenarios. We based assumptions on the targeted support of 60 species status assessments and reassessments per year. We further used a 60/40 split of assessments (36) to reassessments (24), as supported by evidence provided by the department.

For all scenarios, only completed assessments and reassessments were included. The unit of measurement was species status assessment or reassessment and not by status report (as a single status report could include more than 1 assessment). For additional key data assumptions used in this work, see the table below.

Scenario	Data sources	Additional key assumptions
<p>1. Number of assessments required annually to assess all potentially at-risk species by the end of 2030</p> <p>2. Number of years required to assess all potentially at-risk species at the current rate of assessment</p>	<p>Environment and Climate Change Canada</p> <p>Species specialist subcommittees' candidate list</p> <p>General status report</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The candidate species list and general status report lists of species at risk were assumed to be unchanged after our audit period (that is, no additions or removals from those lists in future years). • For the candidate species list, all risk levels for all taxonomic groups were included. • For general status report data, the categories included as “potentially at-risk species” were presumed extirpated, possibly extirpated, critically imperiled, imperiled, and vulnerable. • To compare general status report data to committee assessments, any committee assessments for subspecies levels were considered to be an assessment for that species. • For the model to the end of 2030, the time period was 1 April 2024 (current year) to 31 December 2030.
<p>3. Number of reassessments required annually to eliminate the backlog of species at risk overdue for a reassessment by the end of 2030</p> <p>4. Number of reassessments that would be included in the backlog by the end of 2030 at the current rate of reassessment</p>	<p>Environment and Climate Change Canada</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Species at risk were considered to be overdue for assessment when more than 10 years had passed since the previous assessment. • Ten years was calculated as 3,653 days to account for leap years. • Any individual species assessed as being not at risk, non-active, extinct, or data deficient were excluded from backlog calculations starting on the date of assessment going forward. • For the model to the end of 2030, the time period was 1 April 2024 (current year) to 31 December 2030.

This audit considered relevant United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals and targets, including targets in the Canadian Indicator Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals. The audit also considered the availability of reliable data for measuring progress toward these goals and targets.

Criteria

We used the following criteria to conclude against our audit objective:

Criteria	Sources
<p>Environment and Climate Change Canada determines and provides the support required to assess species at risk of extinction or extirpation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, United Nations • Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, Convention on Biological Diversity, United Nations • Aichi Biodiversity Targets, Convention on Biological Diversity, United Nations • Species at Risk Act • Policy on Results, Treasury Board • Framework for the Management of Risk, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat
<p>Environment and Climate Change Canada determines and provides the support required for timely reassessments of species at risk.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, United Nations • Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, Convention on Biological Diversity, United Nations • Aichi Biodiversity Targets, Convention on Biological Diversity, United Nations • Species at Risk Act • Policy on Results, Treasury Board • Framework for the Management of Risk, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat

Period covered by the audit

The audit covered the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2024. This is the period to which the audit conclusion applies. However, to gain a more complete understanding of the subject matter of the audit, we also examined certain matters that preceded the start date of this period.

Date of the report

We obtained sufficient and appropriate audit evidence on which to base our conclusion on 23 August 2024, in Ottawa, Canada.

Audit team

This audit was completed by a multidisciplinary team from across the Office of the Auditor General of Canada led by Susan Gomez, Principal. The principal has overall responsibility for audit quality, including conducting the audit in accordance with professional standards, applicable legal and regulatory requirements, and the office's policies and system of quality management.

Recommendations and Responses

Responses appear as they were received by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada.

In the following table, the paragraph number preceding the recommendation indicates the location of the recommendation in the report.

Recommendation	Response
<p>9.28 As the critical first step to prevent extinction and extirpation of species at risk in Canada, Environment and Climate Change Canada should</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • determine the appropriate annual targets for species status assessments, given the urgency of the biodiversity crisis and the need to meet Canada’s international commitments • provide the support required for the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada to achieve those targets 	<p>The department’s response. Agreed. The department recognizes the importance of the protection and conservation of species at risk in Canada and will continue to support the committee in delivery of obligations under the <i>Species at Risk Act</i> by assessing and reviewing the classification of species at risk.</p> <p>The department will work collaboratively with the independent, arms-length committee and determine the appropriate annual targets for species status assessments while maintaining the integrity and quality of the committee’s work.</p> <p>The department will work collaboratively with the committee to determine the level of support that is needed to achieve the appropriate annual targets within available resourcing. The department will support the committee in identifying and realizing efficiencies in the committee’s operations and procedures. The department will also look to support the committee in developing a risk-based approach to its annual targets to ensure that those species most at risk of extinction or extirpation receive timely assessments to favour the best conservation outcomes.</p> <p>Expected implementation date: March 31, 2027</p>

Recommendation	Response
<p>9.40 To improve Canadians’ understanding of the status of species at risk, Environment and Climate Change Canada should develop and implement a plan to support the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada to eliminate in a timely way the backlog of species requiring review of classification and to prevent its future growth.</p>	<p>The department’s response. Agreed. The department will work collaboratively with the independent, arms-length committee to develop and implement a formal workplan.</p> <p>The department will work with the committee to determine the vision, priorities, strategies and processes required to support the committee in reducing, in a timely way, the backlogged reviews of classification. The department will also work with the committee to prevent a backlog from expanding in the future. The department will support the committee in doing so while also maintaining the integrity and quality of committee’s assessments and reviews of classification.</p> <p>The department will continue to support a new streamlined approach for reviews of classification with a goal of prioritising resources for species changing status over those that have an unchanged status. The department will support the committee in considering the adoption of a risk-based approach to ensure that species’ reviews of classification are prioritized according to those that have the highest level of conservation concern.</p> <p>The department will work with the committee to ensure the need to consider the best available information from scientific, Indigenous and community knowledge when completing reviews of classifications.</p> <p>The department will support the committee in identifying and implementing efficiencies in its operations and procedures.</p> <p>Expected implementation date: March 31, 2027</p>

