

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-636T](#), a testimony before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Why GAO Did This Study

Ports, waterways, and vessels handle billions of dollars in cargo annually, and an attack on our nation's maritime transportation system could have dire consequences. Ports are inherently vulnerable to terrorist attacks because of their size, general proximity to metropolitan areas, the volume of cargo being processed, and their link to the global supply chain—that is, the flow of goods from manufacturers to retailers. Balancing security concerns with facilitation of the free flow of people and commerce remains an ongoing challenge for federal, state, local, and private stakeholders operating in ports.

Within DHS, several components are responsible for port security activities. These activities include, among other things, promoting maritime domain awareness, conducting port facility inspections, and screening incoming vessels' cargoes for the presence of contraband such as weapons of mass destruction, illicit drugs, or explosives.

This statement discusses progress and challenges in key areas of DHS port security programs. It is based on work GAO has previously conducted from September 2003 to September 2013 with selected updates conducted through May 2014. For these updates, GAO contacted DHS officials and reviewed relevant documents.

What GAO Recommends

In prior reports, GAO has made recommendations to DHS to strengthen various port security programs. DHS generally concurred with the recommendations and has taken actions, or has actions under way, to address most of these recommendations.

View [GAO-14-636T](#). For more information, contact Stephen L. Caldwell at (202) 512-9610 or CaldwellS@gao.gov

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MARITIME SECURITY

Progress and Challenges with Selected Port Security Programs

What GAO Found

GAO's prior work has shown that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and its component agencies—particularly the Coast Guard and Customs and Border Protection (CBP)—have made substantial progress in three key areas of port security since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (9/11), but some challenges remain.

Maritime domain awareness and information sharing. DHS agencies along with other port partners have taken actions to enhance visibility over the maritime domain and facilitate cooperation among partners by collecting, assessing and sharing key information. However, some challenges remain in implementing the tools necessary to maintain this focus and increase coordination among stakeholders. For example, in multiple reports since 2011, GAO found the Coast Guard's weak management of technology acquisitions—that were focused on enhancing maritime awareness and increasing communication among partners—resulted in these acquisitions not fully achieving their intended purposes. DHS concurred with GAO's recommendations for addressing these weaknesses.

Security in domestic ports. Since 9/11, DHS components have taken a wide variety of actions to better secure domestic ports. For example, the Coast Guard has assessed risks to cruise ships in accordance with DHS guidance and is providing escorts for high-risk vessels such as cruise ships and ferries while CBP is reviewing passenger and crew data to target inspections. In addition, since 2002, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has provided almost \$2.9 billion in federal funding through the Port Security Grant Program (PSGP) to help defray the cost of implementing security efforts in many ports and has established measures to improve the administration of the PSGP. However, in 2014 FEMA stated that it is unable—due to resource constraints—to annually measure reduced vulnerability attributed to enhanced PSGP-funded security measures. Meanwhile, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the Coast Guard have been administering a program requiring maritime workers to obtain a biometric identification card to gain access to certain facilities. However, in 2011, GAO recommended that DHS assess internal controls to identify actions needed to address, among other things, weaknesses governing enrollment and background checks. As of March 2014 this action had not been completed.

Protection of the global supply chain. DHS agencies, especially CBP, have taken steps to enhance the security of the global supply chain—particularly for cargo bound for the United States. Efforts have focused on assessing and mitigating cargo risk before it enters U.S. ports by better targeting and scanning cargo, and establishing security partnerships with the foreign countries and companies that ship cargo to the United States. However, in multiple reports since 2005, GAO found that DHS programs focused on protecting the global supply chain have been implemented with varying degrees of success and that many would benefit from the DHS agencies conducting further assessments of the programs, among other things. GAO has made recommendations to address these issues and DHS has concurred or generally concurred with most of these recommendations and has taken actions to address many of them.