GAO
Accountability·Integrity·Reliability
Highlights

TRANSPORTATION SECURITY

Federal Action Needed to Help Address Security Challenges

Why GAO Did This Study

The economic well being of the U.S. is dependent on the expeditious flow of people and goods through the transportation system. The attacks on September 11, 2001, illustrate the threats and vulnerabilities of the transportation system. Prior to September 11, the Department of Transportation (DOT) had primary responsibility for the security of the transportation system. In the wake of September 11, Congress created the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) within DOT and gave it primary responsibility for the security of all modes of transportation. TSA was recently transferred to the new Department of Homeland Security (DHS). GAO was asked to examine the challenges in securing the transportation system and the federal role and actions in transportation security.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS and DOT use a mechanism, such as a memorandum of agreement, to clarify and delineate DOT's and TSA's roles and responsibilities in transportation security matters. DHS and DOT generally agreed with the report's findings; however, they disagreed with the recommendation. Based on the uncertainty in the entities' roles and responsibilities that transportation stakeholders surfaced to us, we continue to believe our recommendation is valid and would help address transportation security challenges.

What GAO Found

Securing the nation's transportation system is fraught with challenges. The transportation system crisscrosses the nation and extends beyond our borders to move millions of passengers and tons of freight each day. The extensiveness of the system as well as the sheer volume of passengers and freight moved makes it both an attractive target and difficult to secure. Addressing the security concerns of the transportation system is further complicated by the number of transportation stakeholders that are involved in security decisions, including government agencies at the federal, state, and local levels, and thousands of private sector companies. Further exacerbating these challenges are the financial pressures confronting transportation stakeholders. For example, the sluggish economy has weakened the transportation industry's financial condition by decreasing ridership and revenues. The federal government has provided additional funding for transportation security since September 11, but demand has far outstripped the additional amounts made available. It will take a collective effort of all transportation stakeholders to meet existing and future transportation challenges.

Since September 11, transportation stakeholders have acted to enhance security. At the federal level, TSA primarily focused on meeting aviation security deadlines during its first year of existence and DOT launched a variety of security initiatives to enhance the other modes of transportation. For example, the Federal Transit Administration provided grants for emergency drills and conducted security assessments at the largest transit agencies, among other things. TSA has recently focused more on the security of the maritime and land transportation modes and is planning to issue security standards for all modes of transportation starting this summer. DOT is also continuing their security efforts. However, the roles and responsibilities of TSA and DOT in securing the transportation system have not been clearly defined, which creates the potential for overlap, duplication, and confusion as both entities move forward with their security efforts.

The Vehicle and Cargo Inspection System is a mobile nonintrusive imaging system used in the inspection of trucks, containers, and cargo and passenger vehicles. The picture on the left shows a truck moving through the inspection equipment. Inspectors use the images produced by the system (below) to determine the contents of the vehicle.
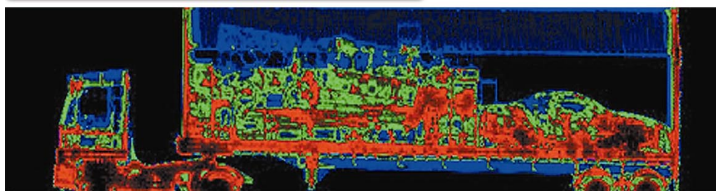
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