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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-06-979](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Fisheries and Coast Guard, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The marine transportation system is a critical part of the nation's infrastructure. To facilitate the safety and efficiency of this system, the Coast Guard maintains aids-to-navigation (ATON), such as buoys and beacons, and conducts domestic icebreaking in the Great Lakes, St. Lawrence Seaway, and northeast coast. To conduct these missions, the Coast Guard has a fleet of more than 200 vessels, ranging from 225-foot seagoing buoy tenders and 140-foot domestic icebreakers to 21-foot boats. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many of these assets took on additional responsibilities for security patrols and other homeland security duties. Although some assets have been recently acquired, many others are reaching or have exceeded their design service lives, raising concerns about how well and for how much longer these older assets may be able to carry out their missions. In response, GAO examined (1) recent trends in the amount of time these assets have spent performing missions; (2) asset condition and its effect on mission performance; and (3) the actions taken by the Coast Guard to continue to achieve the missions of these assets.

To conduct this work, GAO reviewed Coast Guard documents, interviewed Coast Guard officials, and made site visits to various locations around the country.

In commenting on a draft of this report, the Coast Guard provided technical comments, which were incorporated as appropriate.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-979.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Stephen L. Caldwell at (202) 512-9610 or caldwells@gao.gov.

COAST GUARD

Condition of Some Aids-to-Navigation and Domestic Icebreaking Vessels Has Declined; Effect on Mission Performance Appears Mixed

What GAO Found

Many ATON vessels and domestic icebreakers have operated more hours in recent years than in previous years, with the increase coming mainly in homeland security missions. Domestic icebreakers are now used more for homeland security than for icebreaking, reflecting their availability at times of the year when no icebreaking is needed. While not designed for homeland security, the assets can perform such duties acceptably, according to the Coast Guard. Most ATON vessels are used primarily for ATON activities. Newer ATON assets receive the greatest use on other missions, reflecting their greater multi-mission capabilities.

Trends are mixed with regard to asset condition and mission performance. Available evidence, such as the amount of maintenance conducted, suggests condition is declining for some assets, though not precipitously. Coast Guard officials said some assets, while being operated for more hours, are still largely being operated within planned limits. Against this backdrop, indicators for measuring performance show mixed results: some have declined, while others have not. The current measure for asset condition is not clearly linked to mission performance, but the Coast Guard is working on developing a measure that links the two.

Actions the Coast Guard has taken to continue to achieve the missions of these assets include revising maintenance approaches and developing a new analytical tool for deciding which projects provide the most capability for the dollars invested. The Coast Guard continues to acquire some new vessels to replace aging ones, but proposals to rehabilitate or replace other aging vessels have not been implemented, largely because of other funding priorities. The Coast Guard also studied the feasibility of contracting out some activities. While some possibilities for outsourcing were identified in the study, the Coast Guard has identified potential disadvantages to outsourcing these activities.

Coast Guard Buoy Tender (left) and Domestic Icebreaker (right)



Source: Coast Guard.