



Highlights of [GAO-10-694](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The United States and Canada share a border of nearly 5,525 miles. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is responsible for securing the borders while facilitating trade and travel. CBP launched the Free and Secure Trade (FAST) program in 2002 to expedite processing for pre-vetted, low-risk shipments. GAO was requested to assess U.S.-Canadian border delays. This report addresses the following for U.S. northern border land ports of entry: (1) the extent to which wait times data are reliable and reported trends in wait times, (2) any actions CBP has taken to reduce wait times and any challenges that remain, and (3) the extent to which CBP and FAST participants experience the benefits of the FAST program. GAO analyzed CBP information and data on staffing, infrastructure, wait times, training, and the FAST program from 2003 through 2009 to analyze operations. GAO visited six northern border land ports, which were primarily selected based on commercial traffic volume. GAO interviewed importers, trade organizations, and border stakeholders. The results are not generalizable, but provide insights.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that CBP (1) develop milestones for completing the enhancement of the database to capture data on FAST program benefits and (2) conduct a study to determine if program benefits are being realized. DHS concurred.

[View GAO-10-694 or key components.](#)
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BORDER SECURITY

CBP Lacks the Data Needed to Assess the FAST Program at U.S. Northern Border Ports

What GAO Found

CBP does not collect data that would allow it to assess the effect of staffing and infrastructure constraints on wait times, but CBP officials and stakeholders report that wait times have decreased. CBP calculates and reports wait times hourly for 28 of 122 northern border land ports. However, CBP officials and the 13 border stakeholders, importers, and trade organizations GAO interviewed about wait times questioned the accuracy and reliability of CBP's wait times data. For example, CBP officers at three crossings questioned the methods used to estimate wait times, such as driver surveys, which are subjective. According to CBP and all stakeholders GAO interviewed, wait times for commercial vehicles have generally decreased due to lower traffic volumes as a result of the recession as well as staffing and infrastructure improvements, among other things. CBP initiated a pilot project in 2009 to automate wait times measurement and improve the accuracy of the data, and plans to deploy initial technology in the summer of 2010.

To reduce wait times, CBP has taken actions to address staffing constraints and make infrastructure improvements, but challenges remain. CBP has increased northern border staffing levels by 47 percent from fiscal years 2003 through 2010, and thus is better able to staff all available lanes. GAO found that CBP officers receive 3 to 14 weeks of on-the-job training rather than the required 12 to 14 weeks. CBP launched an enhanced tracking system in April 2010 to monitor training, which officials said will enable them to work with field offices that are not providing required training. CBP has a process for identifying and prioritizing capital infrastructure needs at land ports and has infrastructure projects related to 35 of the 122 northern border ports under way or planned over the next 5 years, in part, to help reduce wait times. CBP has made infrastructure improvements at 5 of the 6 land ports GAO visited. CBP officials said they face challenges addressing infrastructure needs, such as expanding infrastructure at the Peace Bridge, which is confined on three sides by the Niagara River, a historic park, and a residential neighborhood.

CBP lacks data needed to assess whether FAST program participants receive program benefits, but depending on the infrastructure available, CBP and 8 of 11 stakeholders GAO interviewed had generally favorable views of the program. CBP's Automated Commercial Environment (ACE) collects data on freight processing but does not differentiate between FAST and non-FAST shipments. Thus, it is difficult for CBP to determine the extent to which participants experience intended benefits. CBP officials stated that the ACE system needs to be modified to capture these data, but CBP has not yet set milestones to do so. Establishing milestones could help CBP ensure that modifications to ACE proceed as planned so that CBP is better positioned to begin collecting data. However, CBP does not have plans to conduct a study to determine if program benefits are being realized once these data have been captured. Conducting such a study would help CBP determine if the benefits are experienced by all FAST participants, and what program adjustments, if any, are needed.