



Highlights of [GAO-10-940T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Ports, waterways, and vessels handle more than \$700 billion in merchandise annually, and an attack on this system could have a widespread impact on global trade and the economy. Within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), component agencies have responsibility for securing the maritime environment. The U.S. Coast Guard is responsible for protecting, among other things, U.S. economic and security interests in any maritime region. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is responsible for keeping terrorists and their weapons out of the United States, securing and facilitating trade, and cargo container security. This testimony discusses DHS and its component agencies' progress, and challenges remaining, regarding (1) strengthening risk management (a strategy to help policymakers make decisions about assessing risks, allocating resources, and acting under conditions of uncertainty), (2) reducing the risk of small-vessel (watercraft less than 300 gross tons used for recreational or commercial purposes) threats, (3) implementing foreign port assessments, and (4) enhancing supply chain security. This statement is based on GAO products issued from December 2005 through June 2010, including selected updates conducted in July 2010.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made recommendations to DHS in prior reports to strengthen port security. DHS generally concurred.

View [GAO-10-940T](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Stephen L. Caldwell at (202) 512-8777 or CaldwellS@gao.gov.

MARITIME SECURITY

DHS Progress and Challenges in Key Areas of Port Security

What GAO Found

DHS and its component agencies have strengthened risk management through the development of a risk assessment model to help prioritize limited port security resources. In December 2005, GAO reported that while the Coast Guard had made progress in strengthening risk management by conducting risk assessments, those assessments were limited because they could not compare and prioritize relative risks of various infrastructures across ports. Since that time, the Coast Guard developed a risk assessment model designed to capture the security risk facing different types of targets, and allowing comparisons among targets and at the local, regional, and national levels. The Coast Guard uses the model to help plan and implement its programs and focus security activities where it believes the risks are greatest.

DHS and the Coast Guard have developed a strategy and programs to reduce the risks associated with small vessels but they face ongoing challenges. GAO reported from 2007 through 2010 that DHS and the Coast Guard have (1) developed a strategy to mitigate vulnerabilities associated with waterside attacks by small vessels; (2) conducted community outreach to encourage boaters to share threat information; (3) initiated actions to track small vessels; (4) tested equipment for detecting nuclear material on small vessels; and (5) conducted security activities, such as vessel escorts. However, the Coast Guard faces challenges with some of these efforts. For example, vessel tracking systems generally cannot track small vessels and resource constraints limit the Coast Guard's ability to meet security activity goals.

DHS and the Coast Guard developed the International Port Security Program in April 2004 to assess the security of foreign ports, but challenges remain in implementing the program. GAO reported in October 2007 that Coast Guard officials stated that there is reluctance by certain countries to allow the Coast Guard to visit their ports due to concerns over sovereignty. Also, the Coast Guard lacks the resources to assist poorer countries. Thus the Coast Guard is limited in its ability to help countries enhance their established security requirements. To overcome this, officials have worked with other federal agencies and international organizations to secure funding for training and assistance to countries that need to strengthen port security efforts.

DHS and CBP established the Secure Freight Initiative (SFI) to test the feasibility of scanning 100 percent of U.S.-bound cargo containers, but face challenges expanding the program. In October 2009, GAO reported that CBP has made progress in working with the SFI ports to scan U.S.-bound cargo containers; but because of challenges implementing scanning operations, such as equipment breakdowns, the feasibility of scanning 100 percent of U.S.-bound cargo containers remains largely unproven. At the time, CBP officials expressed concern that they and the participating ports could not overcome the challenges. GAO recommended that DHS conduct a feasibility analysis. DHS concurred with our recommendation, but has not yet implemented it.