



Highlights of [GAO-09-849](#), a report to Congressional Requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) exercises to test preparedness to perform its homeland defense and civil support missions. GAO was asked to assess the extent to which NORTHCOM is (1) consistent with Department of Defense (DOD) training and exercise requirements, (2) involving interagency partners and states in its exercises, (3) using lessons learned and corrective actions to improve preparedness, and (4) integrating its exercises with the National Exercise Program (NEP). To do this, GAO reviewed NORTHCOM and NEP guidance and postexercise documentation, assessed NORTHCOM compliance, and compared DOD and NEP exercise requirements.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to DOD to direct NORTHCOM to consistently involve the states in planning, executing, and assessing exercises and improve oversight of corrective actions. GAO is also recommending that DOD define when NORTHCOM should use NEP planning and documentation requirements. DOD agreed or partially agreed with the recommendations and cited ongoing and future efforts to satisfy the recommendations' intent. DOD did not fully address a recommendation on training to NORTHCOM staff on specific state emergency management structures. GAO believes such training would benefit NORTHCOM personnel in advance of a crisis and for exercise planning.

[View GAO-09-849 or key components.](#)
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HOMELAND DEFENSE

U.S. Northern Command Has a Strong Exercise Program, but Involvement of Interagency Partners and States Can Be Improved

What GAO Found

NORTHCOM's exercise program is generally consistent with the requirements of DOD's Joint Training System, but its exercise reporting is inconsistent. Since the command was established in 2002, NORTHCOM has conducted 13 large-scale exercises and generally completed exercise summary reports within the required time frame. However, those reports did not consistently include certain information, such as areas needing improvement, because NORTHCOM lacks guidance that specifies exercise reports' content and format, potentially impacting its ability to meet internal standards for planning and execution of joint exercises, and to compare and share exercise results over time with interagency partners and states.

Nineteen federal agencies and organizations and 17 states and the District of Columbia have participated in one or more of the seven large-scale exercises that NORTHCOM has conducted since September 2005. However, NORTHCOM faces challenges in involving states in the planning, conduct, and assessment of its exercises, such as adapting its exercise system and practices to involve other federal, state, local, and tribal agencies that do not have the same practices or level of planning resources. Inconsistencies with how NORTHCOM involves states in exercises are occurring in part because NORTHCOM officials lack experience dealing with states and do not have a consistent process for including states in exercises. Without such a process, NORTHCOM increases the risk that its exercises will not provide benefits for all participants, impact the seamless exercise of all levels of government, and potentially affect NORTHCOM's ability to provide civil support capabilities.

NORTHCOM has a systematic lessons learned and corrective action program to improve preparedness, but gaps remain with collecting and sharing lessons with agency and state partners and managing corrective actions. Access to the system NORTHCOM uses for managing exercise observations is limited for non-DOD participants, and DOD believes that the Department of Homeland Security's system is not adequately protected from unauthorized users. NORTHCOM's mitigation steps have not resolved the issues. In addition, about 20 percent of the corrective actions tracked by NORTHCOM were being closed prematurely due to gaps in oversight. Closing issues prematurely increases the risk that issues will reoccur and limits the knowledge gained and value of the exercise.

NORTHCOM has taken steps to integrate its exercises with the NEP, but guidance is not consistently applied. NORTHCOM has participated in several NEP exercises and is leading its first major NEP exercise in the fall of 2009. However, NORTHCOM has used DOD's Joint Training System planning and documentation requirements rather than DHS's requirements, because NEP guidance is not clear on what exercise planning standard should be used and DOD guidance does not address the issue. The states we visited use NEP guidance. Differences between NEP and DOD guidance could affect the ability of all participants to develop effective working relationships.