



Highlights of [GAO-09-243](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

An attack on the U.S. freight rail system could be catastrophic because rail cars carrying highly toxic materials often traverse densely populated urban areas. The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is the federal entity primarily responsible for securing freight rail. GAO was asked to assess the status of efforts to secure this system. This report discusses (1) stakeholder efforts to assess risks to the freight rail system and TSA's development of a risk-based security strategy; (2) actions stakeholders have taken to secure the system since 2001, TSA's efforts to monitor and assess their effectiveness, and any challenges to implementing future actions; and (3) the extent to which stakeholders have coordinated efforts. GAO reviewed documents, including TSA's freight rail strategic plan; conducted site visits to seven U.S. cities with significant rail operations involving hazardous materials; and interviewed federal and industry officials.

What GAO Recommends

Among other things, GAO recommends that TSA reflect all security threats in strategy, strengthen its performance measures, better assess and track actions being taken, and more closely work with some federal stakeholders. DHS generally concurs with our recommendations and has initiated action on some; however, these actions will not fully address all of the recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-243](#). For more information, contact Cathleen Berrick at (202) 512-3404 or berrickc@gao.gov.

FREIGHT RAIL SECURITY

Actions Have Been Taken to Enhance Security, but the Federal Strategy Can Be Strengthened and Security Efforts Better Monitored

What GAO Found

Federal and industry stakeholders have completed a range of actions to assess risks to freight rail since September 2001, and TSA has developed a security strategy; however, TSA's efforts have primarily focused on one threat, and its strategy does not fully address federal guidance or key characteristics of a successful national strategy. Specifically, TSA's efforts to assess vulnerabilities and potential consequences to freight rail have focused almost exclusively on rail shipments of certain highly toxic materials, in part, because of concerns about their security in transit and limited resources. However, other federal and industry assessments have identified additional potential security threats, including risks to critical infrastructure and cybersecurity. Although many stakeholders agreed with TSA's initial strategy, going forward TSA has agreed that including other identified threats in its freight rail security strategy is important, and reported that it is reconsidering its strategy to incorporate other threats. Additionally, in 2004, GAO reported that successful national strategies should identify performance measures with targets, among other elements. TSA's security strategy could be strengthened by including targets for three of its four performance measures and revising its approach for the other measure to ensure greater consistency in how performance results are quantified.

Federal and industry stakeholders have also taken a range of actions to secure freight rail, many of which have focused on securing certain toxic material rail shipments and have been implemented by industry voluntarily; however, TSA lacks a mechanism to monitor security actions and evaluate their effectiveness, and new requirements could pose challenges for future security efforts. GAO's *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* calls for controls to be designed to ensure ongoing monitoring. While the freight rail industry has taken actions to better secure shipments and key infrastructure, TSA has limited ability to assess the impacts of these actions because it lacks a mechanism to systematically track them and evaluate their effectiveness. Having such information could strengthen TSA's efforts to efficiently target its resources to where actions have not been effective. New, mandatory security planning and procedural requirements will also necessitate additional federal and industry efforts and resources, and may pose some implementation challenges for both federal and industry stakeholders.

Federal and industry stakeholders have also taken a number of steps to coordinate their freight rail security efforts; however, federal coordination can be enhanced by more fully leveraging the resources of all relevant federal agencies. GAO previously identified a number of leading practices for effective coordination that could help TSA strengthen coordination with federal and private sector stakeholders.