



Highlights of [GAO-04-482T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Government Reform, Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The events of September 11, 2001, triggered a national re-examination of the security of thousands of industrial facilities that use or store hazardous chemicals in quantities that could potentially put large numbers of Americans at risk of serious injury or death in the event of a terrorist-caused chemical release. GAO was asked to examine (1) available information on the threats and risks from terrorism faced by U.S. chemical facilities; (2) federal requirements for security preparedness and safety at facilities; (3) actions taken by federal agencies to assess the vulnerability of the industry; and (4) voluntary actions the chemical industry has taken to address security preparedness, and the challenges it faces in protecting its assets and operations. GAO issued a report on this work in March 2003 (GAO-03-439).

## What GAO Recommends

GAO's March 2003 report recommended that the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Administrator of EPA jointly develop a comprehensive national chemical security strategy that is both practical and cost effective, which includes assessing vulnerabilities to terrorist attacks and enhancing security preparedness.

Legislation is now before Congress that, if enacted, would direct DHS, or DHS and EPA, to adopt most of GAO's March 2003 recommendations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-439](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-439).

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact John B. Stephenson at (202) 512-3841 or [stephensonj@gao.gov](mailto:stephensonj@gao.gov).

# HOMELAND SECURITY

## Federal Action Needed to Address Security Challenges at Chemical Facilities

### What GAO Found

Chemical facilities may be attractive targets for terrorists intent on causing economic harm and loss of life. Many facilities exist in populated areas where a chemical release could threaten thousands. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reports that 123 chemical plants located throughout the nation could each potentially expose more than a million people if a chemical release occurred. To date, no one has comprehensively assessed the security of chemical facilities.

No federal laws explicitly require that chemical facilities assess vulnerabilities or take security actions to safeguard their facilities from attack. However, a number of federal laws impose safety requirements on facilities that may help mitigate the effects of a terrorist-caused chemical release. Although EPA believes that the Clean Air Act could be interpreted to require security at certain chemical facilities, the agency has decided not to attempt to require these actions in light of the litigation risk and importance of an effective response to chemical security. Ultimately, no federal oversight or third-party verification ensures that voluntary industry assessments of vulnerability are adequate and that security vulnerabilities are addressed.

Currently, the federal government has not comprehensively assessed the chemical industry's vulnerabilities to terrorist attacks. EPA, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the Department of Justice have taken preliminary steps to assist the industry in its preparedness efforts, but no agency monitors or documents the extent to which chemical facilities have implemented security measures. Consequently, federal, state, and local entities lack comprehensive information on the vulnerabilities facing the industry.

To its credit, the chemical manufacturing industry, led by its industry associations, has undertaken a number of voluntary initiatives to address security at facilities. For example, the American Chemistry Council, whose members own or operate approximately 1,000, or 7 percent, of the facilities subject to Clean Air Act risk management plan provisions, requires its members to conduct vulnerability assessments and implement security improvements. The industry faces a number of challenges in preparing facilities against attacks, including ensuring that all chemical facilities address security concerns. Despite the industry's voluntary efforts, the extent of security preparedness at U.S. chemical facilities is unknown. In October 2002 both the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Administrator of EPA stated that voluntary efforts alone are not sufficient to assure the public of the industry's preparedness. Legislation is now pending that would mandate chemical facilities to take security steps to protect against the risk of a terrorist attack.