COAST GUARD

Condition of Some Aids-to-Navigation and Domestic Icebreaking Vessels Has Declined; Effect on Mission Performance Appears Mixed

What GAO Found

Many ATON vessels and domestic icebreakers have operated more hours in recent years than in previous years, with the increase coming mainly in homeland security missions. Domestic icebreakers are now used more for homeland security than for icebreaking, reflecting their availability at times of the year when no icebreaking is needed. While not designed for homeland security, the assets can perform such duties acceptably, according to the Coast Guard. Most ATON vessels are used primarily for ATON activities. Newer ATON assets receive the greatest use on other missions, reflecting their greater multi-mission capabilities.

Trends are mixed with regard to asset condition and mission performance. Available evidence, such as the amount of maintenance conducted, suggests condition is declining for some assets, though not precipitously. Coast Guard officials said some assets, while being operated for more hours, are still largely being operated within planned limits. Against this backdrop, indicators for measuring performance show mixed results: some have declined, while others have not. The current measure for asset condition is not clearly linked to mission performance, but the Coast Guard is working on developing a measure that links the two.

Actions the Coast Guard has taken to continue to achieve the missions of these assets include revising maintenance approaches and developing a new analytical tool for deciding which projects provide the most capability for the dollars invested. The Coast Guard continues to acquire some new vessels to replace aging ones, but proposals to rehabilitate or replace other aging vessels have not been implemented, largely because of other funding priorities. The Coast Guard also studied the feasibility of contracting out some activities. While some possibilities for outsourcing were identified in the study, the Coast Guard has identified potential disadvantages to outsourcing these activities.

Coast Guard Buoy Tender (left) and Domestic Icebreaker (right)

Source: Coast Guard.