TSA Has Made Progress but Faces Challenges in Meeting the Statutory Mandate for Screening Air Cargo on Passenger Aircraft

What GAO Found

TSA has made progress in meeting the air cargo screening mandate as it applies to domestic cargo, but faces challenges in doing so that highlight the need for a contingency plan. TSA has, for example, increased required domestic cargo screening levels from 50 percent in February 2009 to 75 percent in May 2010, increased the amount of cargo subject to screening by eliminating many domestic screening exemptions, created a voluntary program to allow screening to take place at various points in the air cargo supply chain, conducted outreach to familiarize industry stakeholders with screening requirements, and tested air cargo screening technologies. However, TSA faces several challenges in developing and implementing a system to screen 100 percent of domestic air cargo, and it is questionable, based on reported screening rates, whether 100 percent of such cargo will be screened by August 2010 without impeding the flow of commerce. For example, shipper participation in the voluntary screening program has been lower than targeted by TSA. In addition, TSA has not completed a staffing study to determine the number of inspectors needed to oversee the screening program. Because it is unclear how many industry stakeholders will join the program, TSA could benefit from establishing milestones to complete a staffing study to help ensure that it has the resources it needs under different scenarios. Moreover, TSA faces technology challenges that could affect its ability to meet the screening mandate. Among these, there is no technology approved by TSA to screen large pallets or containers of cargo, which suggests the need for alternative approaches to screening such cargo. TSA also does not verify the self-reported data submitted by screening participants. Several of these challenges suggest the need for a contingency plan, in case the agency’s current initiatives are not successful in meeting the mandate without impeding the flow of commerce. However, TSA has not developed such a plan. Addressing these issues could better position TSA to meet the mandate.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that TSA establish milestones for a staffing study, verify the accuracy of all reported screening data, develop a contingency plan for screening domestic cargo, and develop plans for meeting the mandate as it applies to inbound cargo. TSA partially concurred with verifying screening data and did not concur with developing a contingency plan because it did not believe such actions were feasible. GAO believes these recommendations remain valid, as discussed in this report. TSA agreed with all other recommendations.