

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-196T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Maritime borders are gateways to our nation's maritime transportation system of ports, waterways, and vessels—which handle billions of dollars of cargo annually. An attack on this system could have dire consequences and affect the global economy. In addition, criminals could use small vessels to smuggle narcotics, aliens, and other contraband across U.S. maritime borders. Within DHS, the Coast Guard is responsible for many homeland security efforts in the maritime domain, including conducting port facility and commercial vessel inspections and coordinating maritime information-sharing efforts, among other things. In addition, CBP is responsible for screening incoming vessels' crews and cargo to facilitate the flow of legitimate trade and passengers.

This testimony identifies key factors important to secure the maritime borders, and discusses progress and challenges in related DHS programs. This statement is based on products GAO issued from July 2003 through October 2013.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made recommendations to DHS in prior reports to strengthen its maritime security programs. DHS generally concurred with these recommendations and has taken actions, or has actions under way, to address them.

View [GAO-14-196T](#). For more information, contact Stephen L. Caldwell at (202) 512-9610 or caldwells@gao.gov.

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MARITIME SECURITY

Progress and Challenges in Key DHS Programs to Secure the Maritime Borders

What GAO Found

GAO's prior work has identified several key factors important to secure the maritime borders. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and its components have made progress (e.g., coordinating with partners), and in some cases also experienced challenges with their related maritime security programs.

- **Maintaining robust maritime domain awareness.** It is critical that federal agencies maintain maritime domain awareness—the understanding of anything associated with the global maritime environment that could adversely affect the security, safety, economy, or environment of the United States. The U.S. Coast Guard has developed systems—including information-sharing and vessel-tracking systems—to enhance maritime domain awareness. GAO's prior work has found that the Coast Guard has made progress in developing its systems, but that it also experienced some challenges. For example, in July 2011, GAO reported that the Coast Guard had not met its goal of building a system intended to enable the sharing of information among its new offshore vessels and aircraft. GAO recommended that the agency take actions to address this challenge. DHS concurred and stated it planned to take actions.
- **Assessing risks coming from foreign ports.** The security of maritime borders also depends upon security at foreign ports where cargo bound for the United States originates. U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and the Coast Guard have developed models to assess the risks of foreign ports, foreign vessels entering U.S. ports, and the cargo carried by these vessels from these ports. In September 2013, GAO found that CBP has taken steps to enhance the security of U.S.-bound cargo, but CBP does not periodically assess the supply chain security risks from foreign ports that ship cargo to the United States. GAO recommended that CBP periodically assess the supply chain security risks from these ports. DHS concurred with GAO's recommendation and reported that it planned to take actions to address it.
- **Conducting maritime surveillance, interdiction, and security operations.** Along the coasts and in ports, maritime surveillance, interdiction, and operations are conducted to ensure the security of the maritime borders. For example, CBP's Office of Air and Marine is to provide maritime surveillance and interdiction capabilities. In March 2012, GAO found that the office did not meet its national performance goal and did not provide higher rates of support in locations designated as high priority. GAO made recommendations to help ensure that the office's assets and personnel are best positioned to effectively meet mission needs and address threats, among other things. DHS concurred and reported that it planned to take action to address the recommendations by the end of March 2014.
- **Measuring performance.** In securing our maritime borders, DHS and its component agencies have faced challenges in developing meaningful performance measures. For example, GAO's prior work found that they have experienced challenges collecting complete, accurate, and reliable data; among other things. In January 2011, GAO reported that both CBP and the Coast Guard tracked the frequency of illegal seafarer incidents at U.S. seaports, but the records of these incidents varied considerably between the two component agencies and between the agencies' field and headquarters units. GAO made a recommendation to improve the accuracy of DHS data, and DHS concurred and has made progress in addressing the recommendation.