What GAO Found

In September 2012, GAO reported that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) did not know the total amount its components had invested in research and development (R&D) and did not have policies and guidance for defining R&D and overseeing R&D resources across the department. According to DHS, its Science and Technology Directorate (S&T), Domestic Nuclear Detection Office (DNDO), and Coast Guard were the only components that conducted R&D, and GAO found that these were the only components that reported budget authority, obligations, or outlays for R&D activities to the Office of Management and Budget. However, GAO identified an additional $255 million in R&D obligations made by other DHS components. At the time of GAO’s review, DHS did not have a department-wide policy defining R&D or guidance directing components how to report all R&D activities. GAO recommended that DHS develop policies and guidance to assist components in better understanding how to report R&D activities and better position DHS to determine R&D investments. DHS concurred with the recommendation and, as of September 2014, had updated its guidance to include a definition of R&D but efforts to develop a process for coordinating R&D with other offices remain ongoing and have not yet been completed. GAO will continue to monitor DHS’s efforts to develop its approach for overseeing R&D at the department.

GAO also reported in September 2012 that S&T had taken some steps to coordinate R&D efforts across DHS, but the department’s R&D efforts were fragmented and overlapping, a fact that increased the risk of unnecessary duplication. GAO recommended that DHS develop a policy defining roles and responsibilities for coordinating R&D and establish a mechanism to track all R&D projects to help DHS mitigate existing fragmentation and overlap and reduce the risk of unnecessary duplication. DHS concurred with the recommendation. As of September 2014, S&T has not fully implemented new policy guidance but, according to S&T, is conducting portfolio reviews across the department, as directed by the fiscal year 2013 appropriations act, aimed at coordinating R&D activities. GAO will continue to monitor DHS’s efforts to develop a policy to better coordinate and track R&D activities at the department.

In September 2013, GAO reported that DHS border and maritime R&D components reported producing 97 R&D deliverables from fiscal years 2010 through 2012 at an estimated cost of $177 million. GAO found that the type of border and maritime R&D deliverables produced by S&T, the Coast Guard, and DNDO varied, and R&D customers GAO met with had mixed views on the impact of the deliverables. These deliverables included knowledge products and reports, technology prototypes, and software. For example, S&T developed prototype radar and video systems for use by Border Patrol. However, GAO reported that S&T had not established time frames and milestones for collecting and evaluating feedback from its customers. DHS concurred with GAO’s recommendations and has actions underway to address them.

What GAO Recommends

In its prior reports, GAO recommended, among other things, that DHS develop policies and guidance for defining, overseeing, coordinating, and tracking R&D activities across the department, and that S&T establish time frames and milestones for collecting and evaluating feedback from its customers. DHS concurred with GAO’s recommendations and has actions underway to address them.

View GAO-14-865T. For more information, contact Dave Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or maurerd@gao.gov.

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