CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION

Improved Planning Needed to Strengthen Trade Enforcement

What GAO Found

Two offices within U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) enforce U.S. trade laws and protect revenue. The Office of Trade develops policies to guide CBP’s trade enforcement efforts, while the Office of Field Operations conducts a range of trade processing and enforcement activities at U.S. ports. CBP’s previously port-centric approach to trade enforcement has shifted to a national-level, industry-focused approach with the establishment of the Office of Field Operations’ 10 Centers of Excellence and Expertise. These Centers represent a shift in trade operations, centralizing the processing of certain imported goods on a national scale through a single Center rather than individual ports of entry.

Counterfeit Goods Seized by U.S. Customs and Border Protection at a Port in New York

CBP conducts trade enforcement across seven high-risk issue areas using a risk-based approach, but its plans generally lack performance targets that would enable it to assess the effectiveness of its enforcement activities. Violations in the high-risk issue areas can cause significant revenue loss, harm the U.S. economy, or threaten the health and safety of the American people. CBP’s trade enforcement activities reduce risk of noncompliance and focus efforts on high-risk imports, according to CBP. For example, CBP conducts targeting of goods, conducts audits and verifications of importers, seizes prohibited goods, collects duties, and assesses penalties. However, CBP cannot assess the effectiveness of its activities without developing performance targets as suggested by leading practices for managing for results.

Over the past 5 fiscal years, CBP generally has not met the minimum staffing levels set by Congress for four of nine positions that perform customs revenue functions, and it generally has not met the optimal staffing level targets identified by the agency for these positions. Staffing shortfalls can impact CBP’s ability to enforce trade effectively, for example, by leading to reduced compliance audits and decreased cargo inspections, according to CBP officials. CBP cited several challenges to filling staffing gaps, including that hiring for trade positions is not an agency-wide priority. Contrary to leading practices in human capital management, CBP has not articulated how it plans to reach its staffing targets for trade positions over the long term, generally conducting its hiring on an ad hoc basis.

This is a public version of a sensitive but unclassified report that GAO issued in April 2017. Information that CBP deemed sensitive has been redacted.