Assessing Risks and Measuring Performance Could Improve Maritime Transportation

Why GAO Did This Study

The Great Lakes-Seaway system extends 2,300 miles and serves more than 100 ports in the United States and Canada. Four of the 17 locks that enable navigation are managed by the Army Corps (within the Department of Defense) and U.S. Seaway Corporation (within the Department of Transportation). The rest are managed by Canada. A 2007 U.S.-Canada study noted the system could absorb additional traffic and led to U.S. asset renewal plans to improve lock infrastructure condition.

GAO was asked to review efforts to modernize the Great Lakes-Seaway. This report examines (1) shipping trends since 1980 and factors affecting recent trends, (2) stakeholder views on challenges to use, and (3) the extent to which the Army Corps and the U.S. Seaway Corporation have made progress on and measure performance of lock renewal efforts. GAO analyzed Seaway and Army Corps shipping data from 1980 through 2016, the agencies’ asset renewal plans, and interviewed 24 stakeholders, including port and shipper representatives, selected to represent a range of perspectives.

What GAO Finds

The tons of cargo moved by domestic Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Seaway traffic have declined since 1980—by 32 and 48 percent, respectively, according to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Army Corps) and Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation (U.S. Seaway Corporation) data. Stakeholders identified various factors for this decrease such as the U.S. economy’s shift away from manufacturing. Traffic on the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Seaway (Great Lakes-Seaway) is traditionally dominated by bulk commodities like iron ore, although stakeholders noted emerging uses like containerized cargo and cruises.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that (1) the U.S. Seaway Corporation establish a process to identify, analyze, and monitor risks to the system’s use to inform future actions, and (2) the Army Corps develop and adopt goals and measures to assess the performance of the Soo Locks and assess of asset renewal outcomes. The Departments of Transportation and Defense concurred with our recommendations and provided technical comments which we incorporated as appropriate.

View GAO-18-610. For more information, contact Susan Fleming at (202) 512-2834 or flemings@gao.gov.