



COAST GUARD

Non-Homeland Security Performance Measures Are Generally Sound, but Opportunities for Improvement Exist

Highlights of [GAO-06-816](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Fisheries and Coast Guard, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Using performance measures, the Coast Guard explains how well its programs are performing. To do so, it reports one “primary” measure for each program (such as percent of mariners rescued) and maintains data on other, “secondary” measures (such as percent of property saved). Concerns have been raised about whether measures for non-homeland security programs accurately reflect performance, that is, they did not rise or fall as resources were added or reduced. For the six non-homeland security programs, GAO used established criteria to assess the soundness of the primary measures—that is, whether measures cover key activities; are clearly stated; and are objective, measurable, and quantifiable—and the reliability of data used to calculate them. GAO also used these criteria to assess the soundness of 23 selected secondary measures. Finally, through interviews and report review, GAO assessed challenges in using measures to link resources to results.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made recommendations to clarify, develop targets, establish criteria, and review external data for certain performance measures and improve the Coast Guard’s overall reporting of results. DHS and the Coast Guard generally agreed with the recommendations in this report.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-816.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Stephen L. Caldwell at (202) 512-9610 or caldwells@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

While some opportunities for improvement exist, the primary measures for the Coast Guard’s six non-homeland security programs are generally sound, and the data used to calculate them are generally reliable. All six measures cover key program activities and are objective, measurable, and quantifiable, but three are not completely clear—that is, they do not consistently provide clear and specific descriptions of the data, events, or geographic areas they include. Also, the processes used to enter and review the Coast Guard’s own internal data are likely to produce reliable data; however, neither the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) nor the Coast Guard have policies or procedures for reviewing or verifying data from external sources, such as other federal agencies. Currently, the review processes vary from source to source, and for the primary measure covering marine environmental protection (which concerns oil and chemical spills), the processes are insufficient.

Of the 23 secondary performance measures GAO assessed, 9 are generally sound, with weaknesses existing in the remaining 14. These weaknesses include (1) a lack of measurable performance targets, (2) a lack of agencywide criteria or guidance to ensure objectivity, and (3) unclear descriptions of the measures.

Two main challenges exist with using primary measures to link resources to results. In one case, the challenge is comprehensiveness—that is, although each primary measure captures a major segment of program activity, no one measure captures all program activities and thereby accounts for all program resources. The other challenge involves external factors, some of which are outside the Coast Guard’s control, that affect performance. For example, weather conditions can affect the amount of ice that must be cleared, the number of aids to navigation that need repair, or mariners that must be rescued. As a result, linking resources and results is difficult, and although the Coast Guard has a range of ongoing initiatives to do so, it is still too early to assess the agency’s ability to successfully provide this link.

Soundness of Primary Measures and Reliability of Data Used to Calculate the Primary Measure for the Coast Guard’s Non-Homeland Security Programs

Program	Is the primary measure sound?	Are the data used to calculate the measure reliable?
Aids to navigation	●	●
Ice operations	○	●
Living marine resources	○	●
Marine environmental protection	●	○
Marine safety	●	●
Search and rescue	○	●

Legend: ● Yes
○ Weaknesses identified

Source: GAO analysis of Coast Guard primary performance measures.