

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-32](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Coast Guard estimates that there were more than 22 million small vessels operating in the United States in 2012. Terrorists, smugglers, and other criminals can use small vessels as platforms for their activities because small vessels are generally unregulated and largely anonymous. Law enforcement agencies face the challenge of distinguishing between legitimate small vessel operators and the relatively few individuals estimated to be engaged in illicit activities. DHS issued its *SVSS* in April 2008 and its follow-on *SVSS Implementation Plan* in January 2011 to help guide actions to mitigate the security risks arising from small vessels. Given the importance of small vessel security, GAO was asked to review DHS's efforts in developing and implementing the *SVSS Implementation Plan*.

This report examines what actions, if any, DHS and its components have taken to address small vessel security concerns, and the extent to which they have implemented action items in the *SVSS Implementation Plan*. GAO analyzed DHS documents; interviewed DHS officials; and visited two ports selected on the basis of the volume of small vessel traffic and security initiatives in place, among other things. While the results of the port visits cannot be generalized across all ports, they provided insights on small vessel security issues and operations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS regularly update the progress its components and other relevant stakeholders are making in addressing action items in the *SVSS Implementation Plan*. DHS concurred with the recommendation.

View [GAO-14-32](#). For more information, contact Stephen Caldwell at (202) 512-9610 or caldwells@gao.gov.

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MARITIME SECURITY

DHS Could Benefit from Tracking Progress in Implementing the *Small Vessel Security Strategy*

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and its components—such as the U.S. Coast Guard and Customs and Border Protection (CBP)—have started or completed initiatives to address small vessel security risks, but DHS is not tracking the progress being made to address action items in the *Small Vessel Security Strategy (SVSS) Implementation Plan*. “Small vessels” are characterized as any watercraft—regardless of method of propulsion—less than 300 gross tons, and used for recreational or commercial purposes. DHS component officials GAO met with identified examples of key initiatives that they have completed or have under way to enhance small vessel security, including an initiative to help CBP better track small vessels arriving from foreign locations and another to assist the Coast Guard in assessing and monitoring small vessel launch sites. Although the *SVSS Implementation Plan* states that DHS is to assess and update the plan, DHS has not determined the progress its components and other relevant stakeholders—such as the Department of Defense—are making in completing the action items and has no current plans to do so. DHS officials stated that this is due, in part, to budget constraints that make this a low priority. DHS officials stated that updating the *SVSS Implementation Plan* would be valuable, and doing so is particularly important since more than one component could be responsible for action items in the plan. Accordingly, by systematically gathering information from its components and other relevant stakeholders to regularly update the progress they are making in addressing the action items in the plan, DHS could help prioritize initiatives given constrained budgets and better identify successes and lessons learned, among other things.

The Results of a Small Vessel Attack on the USS Cole



Source: Department of Defense.