

Highlights of GAO-14-826, a report to congressional requesters

September 2014

## COMBATING NUCLEAR SMUGGLING

### Risk-Informed Covert Assessments and Oversight of Corrective Actions Could Strengthen Capabilities at the Border

#### Why GAO Did This Study

Preventing terrorists from smuggling nuclear or radiological materials into the United States is a top national priority. To address this threat, DHS has deployed radiation detection equipment and trained staff to use it. CBP conducts covert operations to test capabilities for detecting and interdicting nuclear and radiological materials at air, land, and sea ports of entry into the United States as well as checkpoints. GAO was asked to review CBP's covert testing operations. This report assesses the extent to which (1) CBP covert operations assess capabilities at air, land, and sea ports and checkpoints to detect and interdict nuclear and radiological material smuggled across the border and (2) CBP reports its covert operations results and provides oversight to ensure that corrective actions are implemented. GAO analyzed documents, such as test summaries, directives, and planning and guidance papers and interviewed DHS, CBP, and Domestic Nuclear Detection Office officials. This is a public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in July 2014. Information that DHS deemed sensitive has been redacted.

#### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS inform priorities for covert operations by using an assessment of risk, determining time frames for reporting results, addressing barriers for meeting time frames, and developing a mechanism to track corrective actions. DHS concurred with GAO's recommendations.

#### What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) covert operations provide limited assessment of capabilities to detect and interdict the smuggling of nuclear and radiological materials into the United States. DHS's U.S. Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) Operational Field Testing Division (OFTD) conducted 144 covert operations at 86 locations from fiscal years 2006 through 2013, selecting its locations from a total of 655 U.S. air, land, and sea port facilities; checkpoints; and certain international locations. These operations allowed OFTD to assess capabilities for detecting and interdicting—or intercepting—nuclear and radiological materials at locations tested. Results showed differences in the rate of success for interdicting smuggled nuclear and radiological materials across facility types. CBP had a \$1 million budget for covert operations of various activities—including nuclear and radiological testing—covering fiscal years 2009 through 2013, and DHS policy requires that components with limited resources make risk-informed decisions. However, CBP testing does not inform capabilities across all border locations, and CBP has not conducted a risk assessment that could inform and prioritize the locations, materials, and technologies to be tested through covert operations. Given limited resources, assessing risk to prioritize the most dangerous materials, most vulnerable locations, and most critical equipment for testing through covert operations, DHS could better inform its decisions on how to expend its limited resources effectively, consistent with the department's risk management policies.

OFTD has not issued reports annually as planned on covert operation results and recommendations, limiting CBP oversight for improving capabilities to detect and interdict smuggling at the border. OFTD has issued three reports on the results of its covert operations at U.S. ports of entry since 2007. However, OFTD officials stated that because of resource constraints, reports have not been timely and do not include the results of covert tests conducted at checkpoints. Furthermore, OFTD tracks the status of corrective actions taken to address recommendations in these reports; however, CBP does not track corrective actions identified from their individual covert operations that were not included in these reports. Establishing appropriate time frames for reporting of covert operations results and addressing barriers to meeting these time frames would help enhance CBP's accountability for its covert testing operations. Further, developing a mechanism to track whether ports of entry and checkpoints have implemented corrective actions could help inform management decision making on the need for further investments in equipment or personnel training to protect U.S. borders.

View GAO-14-826. For more information, contact David C. Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or [maurerd@gao.gov](mailto:maurerd@gao.gov); or David C. Trimble at (202) 512-3841 or [trimbled@gao.gov](mailto:trimbled@gao.gov).