

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-181](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Congress established DNFSB in 1988 to provide independent analysis and recommendations to the Department of Energy (DOE) to ensure adequate protection of public health and safety at defense nuclear facilities. DNFSB consists of a five-member Board, which currently has two vacancies, and about 103 technical, legal, and administrative staff. DNFSB's fiscal year 2013 budget was \$26.8 million. Until fiscal year 2012, DNFSB was not required to have an IG and did not have routine independent oversight by any other federal entity.

GAO was asked to review the operations and oversight of DNFSB. This report examines the extent to which DNFSB had (1) policies and procedures governing the activities of the Board and technical staff; (2) assessed its internal controls; (3) meeting and voting practices that are transparent to the public; and (4) taken steps to obtain IG oversight and the results of those steps. GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and guidance; analyzed DNFSB documents, including records of internal control assessments; interviewed officials from DNFSB, NRC-OIG, and DOE; and gathered information from 14 other federal agency IGs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that DNFSB document its internal control assessment activities and implement a policy to publicly disclose the results of Board votes. In commenting on a draft of this report, DNFSB described actions it had taken or planned to take to address these recommendations.

View [GAO-15-181](#). For more information, contact John Neumann at (202) 512-3841 or neumannj@gao.gov.

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DEFENSE NUCLEAR FACILITIES SAFETY BOARD

Improvements Needed to Strengthen Internal Control and Promote Transparency

What GAO Found

Until 2013, the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (DNFSB) had few written policies and procedures for its Board members and technical staff work, and some policies and procedures recently developed for the Board were not consistently followed. For example, Board procedures call for the Board to approve and implement an annual resource plan that would prioritize DNFSB's work for the coming year, but DNFSB has not approved a resource plan for fiscal year 2015. DNFSB officials did not know when the Board would pass a resource plan. DNFSB also began developing detailed written policies and procedures for its technical staff in 2013. DNFSB anticipates implementing 90 technical policies and procedures by 2016, according to agency officials. As of the end of September 2014, 16 had been implemented.

DNFSB records of internal control assessments were missing or incomplete in every fiscal year from 2007 through 2014. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance for internal control directs agencies to document their internal control activities and to retain that documentation. DNFSB has a four-step internal control assessment process consisting of the selection of the areas to be assessed, performance of the assessments, management review of the assessments, and annual management assurance statements to the Chairman of the overall adequacy of internal control within the agency. However, records were missing or incomplete at each step, and DNFSB officials said that some steps likely were not performed, in part due to the departure of officials responsible for them. Having documentation of internal control assessment activities would provide DNFSB with a record that it is performing all steps of its internal control process and help provide reasonable assurance that control activities are being accurately performed.

The Board at DNFSB does not have meeting and voting practices that are transparent to the public. Until October 2014, the Board did not hold public meetings to deliberate and conduct business, and it instead employs a voting practice known as notational voting. Under this practice, the Board circulates written materials for members to review, comment on, and vote on in writing. DNFSB does not publicly disclose the results of these votes, unlike many other agencies. In June 2014, the Board voted to create a policy to disclose its voting results. However, in October 2014, a Board member raised concerns that the policy was not being developed. Moreover, as of November 2014, such a policy had not been developed. The Administrative Conference of the United States, an independent federal agency that provides advice on agency procedures, recommended in June 2014 that agencies using notational voting publicly disclose the conclusions reached via such voting. Having a policy to disclose the matters on which the Board is voting and the results of those votes would enhance DNFSB's transparency, allowing the public to be aware of the Board's decisions, which is important given DNFSB's mission.

DNFSB took some steps to obtain Inspector General (IG) services from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Office of the IG (NRC-OIG) and 17 other OIGs but did not meet two statutory deadlines to obtain IG services. In January 2014, the NRC-OIG became DNFSB's IG by statute and began work in April 2014.