

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-446](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

DOD and DOE's NNSA are jointly responsible for managing aspects of the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile. The Council, established by Congress in 1986, includes five senior officials from both departments; it facilitates coordination between DOD and NNSA and establishes program priorities. DOD and NNSA are working to modernize the nuclear enterprise, including delivery systems and nuclear weapons that are aging and being used longer than originally intended. DOD and NNSA project this work will cost about \$332 billion through 2025.

House Report 113-446 included a provision for GAO to review the Council's role, responsibilities, and effectiveness. This report addresses: (1) how the Council carries out its statutory and regulatory responsibilities and any challenges it faces in doing so and (2) the extent to which the Council's actions are consistent with key practices for interagency collaboration. GAO reviewed laws, agreements, and Council documents such as reports and compared Council actions with key practices and considerations for interagency collaboration that GAO identified in 2005 and 2012.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD and DOE update the Council's 1997 memorandum of agreement to (1) describe Council processes and its two support committees' roles, responsibilities, structure, and functions and (2) require that DOD and NNSA budget and program evaluation officials attend all support committee meetings. DOD and NNSA generally agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-15-446](#). For more information, contact Joseph Kirschbaum at (202) 512-9971 or kirschbaumj@gao.gov or David Trimble at (202) 512-3841 or trimbled@gao.gov.

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NUCLEAR WEAPONS COUNCIL

Enhancing Interagency Collaboration Could Help with Implementation of Expanded Responsibilities

What GAO Found

The Nuclear Weapons Council (Council)—which serves as the focal point of Department of Defense (DOD) and National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) interagency activities to maintain the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile—carries out its statutory and regulatory responsibilities in a number of ways, but faces challenges in doing so. The Council's actions to carry out its responsibilities include documenting requirements for the size and composition of the nuclear weapons stockpile and setting stockpile priorities. The Council also provides oversight of refurbishment programs through periodic program reviews and coordinates budget matters between DOD and NNSA to support the stockpile. However, the Council faces several challenges in carrying out its responsibilities. The Council's challenges include carrying out several new budget-related responsibilities, such as certifying to Congress whether the annual budget request for NNSA meets stockpile requirements; providing oversight for two more refurbishment programs than it has previously; and adjusting program priorities in response to budget pressures, such as delays and cost growth experienced by some NNSA nuclear weapons programs.

The Council's actions to coordinate DOD's and NNSA's nuclear weapons stockpile responsibilities are generally consistent with most key practices for interagency collaboration, but the Council's actions are not fully consistent with those practices and related key considerations in two areas. First, key practices for interagency collaboration call for agencies to define their respective roles, responsibilities, and steps for decision making and to have a current written agreement on how they will collaborate. The Council does not have an up-to-date agreement that reflects the processes it uses to carry out its responsibilities. The 1997 memorandum of agreement between DOD and the Department of Energy (DOE) that is to guide the Council's efforts has not been updated, although the Council's responsibilities were expanded in 2013, and it does not define the roles, responsibilities, structure, and functions of the two support committees that conduct the Council's day-to-day operations. Council officials said they have not updated the agreement because they do not believe it is necessary and that doing so could restrict their flexibility by being too prescriptive. However, other officials said there has been confusion and disagreement over some Council processes such as certifying the budget request for NNSA and that updating the memorandum of agreement might improve the clarity and consistency of the Council's processes. Without an updated memorandum of agreement that describes Council processes, it may be difficult for the Council to provide greater clarity to support committee members on how their work is to be conducted. Second, a key consideration when implementing collaborative mechanisms is whether all relevant participants have been included in the effort. However, DOD and NNSA budget and program evaluation officials are not required to attend Council support committee meetings. DOD budget and program evaluation officials are invited and generally attend, but NNSA budget and program evaluation officials generally do not attend because they are invited at the discretion of NNSA support committee members. Without a requirement that both DOD and NNSA budget and program evaluation officials consistently attend all support committee meetings, the Council may be limited in its ability to manage and respond to unanticipated budget questions as they arise at meetings.