

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-584](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. Coast Guard has multimission responsibilities to support response efforts and help protect life, property, and the environment. The Coast Guard must often rely on surge operations to reduce the impacts of catastrophic events, such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 and Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria in 2017.

The William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 includes a provision for GAO to review the Coast Guard's surge capacity to respond to catastrophic events. This report addresses (1) the number of major surge operations the Coast Guard conducted from 2007 through 2020, and what personnel and assets it used to support these operations; (2) the extent the Coast Guard documents lessons learned and best practices from its major surge operations and resolves related recommended actions; and (3) how surge operations have affected the Coast Guard's ability to conduct its statutory missions. GAO reviewed, among other things, documentation from Coast Guard surge operations from 2007 through 2020; analyzed after-action reports and performance metrics; and interviewed Coast Guard officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Coast Guard establish a more systematic process for ensuring that recommended actions are tracked, updated, and resolved in line with Coast Guard goals. The Department of Homeland Security concurred with this recommendation.

View [GAO-21-584](#). For more information, contact Heather MacLeod at (202) 512-8777 or macleodh@gao.gov.

September 2021

COAST GUARD

A More Systematic Process to Resolve Recommended Actions Could Enhance Future Surge Operations

What GAO Found

From 2007 through 2020, the Coast Guard conducted 23 major surge operations—high-intensity, short-notice efforts to respond to catastrophic events or emergencies, such as hurricanes, oil spills, and humanitarian events. To support these surge operations, the Coast Guard deployed varying levels of personnel, aircraft, and vessels according to the events' severity and duration.

Photo of Coast Guard Personnel Responding to Hurricane Harvey (2017)



Source: U.S. Coast Guard. | [GAO-21-584](#)

The Coast Guard documents lessons learned and best practices from its major surge operations and develops recommended actions to help improve future operations. The Coast Guard also has processes for assigning recommended actions to appropriate headquarters offices and field units. However, GAO's analysis of Coast Guard data on major surge operations shows that it has not met its goals of (1) resolving 80 percent of recommended actions or (2) resolving the actions within 18 months of being assigned. GAO analysis also found that Coast Guard headquarters offices have a higher proportion of unresolved recommended actions compared with field units. The *Coast Guard Strategic Plan for 2018-2022* calls for acting on lessons learned and best practices from surge events as important factors for improving emergency management. However, the Coast Guard lacks assurance that recommended actions to address surge operation deficiencies are tracked, updated, and resolved in line with program goals. Without a more systematic process to help ensure that this occurs, the Coast Guard may not address identified issues that could affect its ability to effectively conduct future surge operations.

The Coast Guard was generally able to meet statutory mission performance targets in years that it also conducted surge operations. While Coast Guard data showed variation in mission activities in years with concurrent or back-to-back surge operations, GAO was not able to determine the effect that surge operations had on mission activities because of multiple factors beyond surge operations, such as personnel transfers, that can also affect mission activities. Additionally, Coast Guard officials did not identify any statutory or regulatory impediments to the Coast Guard's ability to conduct surge operations.