

A report to congressional requesters

For more information, contact: Heather MacLeod at MacLeodH@gao.gov

What GAO Found

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) administers the Port Security Grant Program (PSGP), in coordination with the U.S. Coast Guard. This risk-based grant program provides funds to public and private sector entities to implement security plans and correct Coast Guard-identified vulnerabilities at U.S. ports. From fiscal year 2018 through 2024, FEMA awarded more than half of the \$690 million in grant funds to eight port areas, and 82 port areas across the U.S. received funds. Three project types received 59 percent of grant funds from fiscal year 2021 through 2024: response vessels (\$88.2 million), surveillance cameras (\$76.1 million), and cybersecurity (\$64.0 million). FEMA also awarded funds for other project types including communication equipment, physical security, and training.

Examples of Projects Funded by the Port Security Grant Program



Fire boat

Source: GAO. | GAO-25-107587



Surveillance cameras on a bridge

FEMA and the Coast Guard have processes to evaluate grant applications and make award recommendations. However, the grant announcement does not include a description of all criteria used in these processes, as federal regulations require. Specifically, the fiscal year 2024 grant announcement does not (1) fully or accurately describe the scoring criteria used in the Coast Guard-led portion of the application evaluation process or (2) describe all factors other than merit criteria that FEMA may use in selecting applications for award, such as the five percent of funds set aside for highly effective projects in lower-risk ports. Adding this required information to the grant announcement could improve transparency and fairness for applicants and help them put forward applications better aligned with the evaluation criteria FEMA uses when awarding PSGP funds to enhance port security.

Further, FEMA has not fully assessed the application evaluation process to ensure that its outcomes achieve the program's multiple goals—funding projects in high-risk port areas; prioritizing projects aligned with national priorities; and funding highly effective projects in lower-risk port areas. For example, projects aligned with a national priority receive a 20 percent score increase, but FEMA has not assessed whether that increase leads to funding more projects aligned with national priorities. Assessing each step of the evaluation process could help FEMA ensure that the process leads to results aligned with FEMA's program goals.

Why GAO Did This Study

U.S. ports are critical to the economy, and any disruption in maritime operations—such as an attack on a port—can impact the supply chain and the U.S. economy.

GAO was asked to examine FEMA's management of PSGP. This report examines the types and locations of projects awarded PSGP funds from fiscal year 2018 through 2024 and the extent FEMA followed required and recommended practices for grants, among other objectives. GAO analyzed FEMA and Coast Guard's grant and scoring data from fiscal years 2018 through 2024, reviewed FEMA and Coast Guard program documents, and interviewed FEMA and Coast Guard officials. GAO visited two ports to gather port stakeholders' perspectives on PSGP and observe projects that received PSGP funding. GAO also interviewed port stakeholders from nine Coast Guard-led maritime security committees.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to ensure that FEMA, in consultation with the Coast Guard, updates the PSGP grant announcement to include all (1) application review criteria and their relative weights and (2) factors other than merit criteria that FEMA may use in selecting applications for award. GAO also recommends that FEMA assess each step of the application evaluation process to determine if its results are consistent with FEMA's goals for distributing the program funds. DHS concurred with the recommendations.