GAO Highlights

ENVIRONMENTAL LIABILITIES

Coast Guard Should Give Congress More Information on Millions of Dollars in Potential Costs

GAO-26-108173 **July 2026**

A report to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

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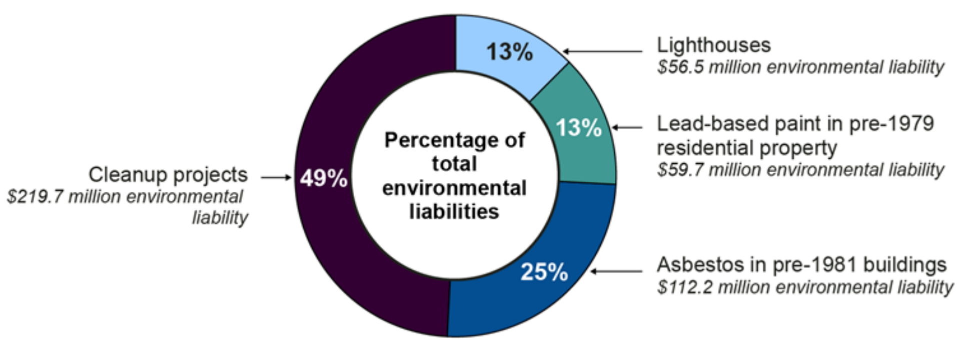
What GAO Found

As of September 2025, the Coast Guard reported about $448 million in environmental liabilities related to its shore infrastructure. This includes about $228 million for structures, like housing, presumed to be contaminated with asbestos-containing material or lead-based paint based on their age. It also includes about $220 million in cleanup projects at sites with a known or suspected release of contaminants.

Several factors create uncertainty that could potentially lead to hundreds of millions of dollars of additional cleanup costs that the Coast Guard has not communicated to Congress. For example, the Coast Guard has identified properties which may be contaminated with “forever chemicals” (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances [PFAS]), which could increase its fiscal exposure by hundreds of millions of dollars more than it reports. Providing additional context on the potential or likely fiscal exposure associated with contaminants the Coast Guard has identified would give Congress better insight into the total potential fiscal exposure.

Coast Guard’s Reported $448 Million Environmental Liability for Shore Infrastructure, Fiscal Year 2025



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard information. | GAO-26-108173

Note: The Coast Guard reviews its environmental liability data each quarter to ensure properties are not counted in more than one category.

The Coast Guard has not fully incorporated risk-informed decision-making in its management of the environmental liabilities program. For example, the Coast Guard has not developed performance measures or evaluated outcomes for the program as GAO’s framework for risk-informed decision-making recommends. According to GAO’s framework, agencies should develop an analysis plan and evaluate outcomes based on clearly defined objectives and performance measures, among other things.

The Coast Guard has not fully met these risk-informed steps, largely because it has not developed a long-term strategy to define the objectives of its environmental liabilities program. Developing a strategy could help the Coast Guard make risk-informed decisions about the long-term management of its growing portfolio of environmental liabilities and achieve financial benefits—for example, by using analysis to strategically sequence cleanup projects.

Why GAO Did This Study

The Coast Guard has a $28 billion inventory of shore infrastructure assets, such as boat stations and lighthouses. Many of these assets have environmental contamination due to past practices. Federal agencies are required to estimate and report their anticipated cleanup costs—also known as environmental liabilities—related to environmental contamination.

GAO was asked to review the Coast Guard’s environmental liabilities for its shore infrastructure assets. This report examines, among other things, (1) the Coast Guard’s environmental liabilities for shore infrastructure in recent years, including factors contributing to uncertainty in those liability estimates, and (2) the extent to which the Coast Guard uses risk-informed decision-making to manage its environmental liabilities program.

GAO analyzed Coast Guard policies, guidance, and data related to the Coast Guard’s environmental liabilities for shore infrastructure and compared these with GAO’s risk-informed decision-making framework for managing environmental hazards. GAO also interviewed agency officials to identify and describe factors related to uncertainty in its estimates.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that the Coast Guard (1) expand the information provided to Congress regarding its fiscal exposure to environmental liabilities and (2) develop a long-term strategy for managing its environmental liabilities program.

The Department of Homeland Security agreed with the recommendations.