NUCLEAR SECURITY

DOE Needs to Fully Address Issues Affecting Protective Forces’ Personnel Systems

What GAO Found

Over 2,300 contractor protective forces provide armed security for DOE and the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) at six sites that have long-term missions to store and process Category I SNM. DOE protective forces at each of these sites are covered under separate contracts and collective bargaining agreements between contractors and protective force unions. As a result, the management, organization, staffing, training, and compensation—in terms of pay and benefits—of protective forces vary.

Protective force contractors, unions, and DOE security officials are concerned that the implementation of TRF’s more rigorous requirements and the current protective forces’ personnel systems threaten the ability of protective forces—especially older members—to continue their careers until retirement age. These concerns, heightened by broader DOE efforts to manage postretirement and pension liabilities for its contractors that might have a negative impact on pension eligibility and benefits for protective forces, contributed to a 44-day protective force strike at an important NNSA site in 2007. According to protective force union officials, the issues surrounding TRF implementation and retirement benefits are still unresolved and could lead to strikes at three sites with large numbers of protective forces when their collective bargaining agreements expire in 2012.

Efforts to more uniformly manage protective forces have focused on either reforming the current contracting approach or creating a federal protective force (federalization). Either approach might provide for managing protective forces more uniformly and could result in effective security if well-managed. However, if protective forces were to be federalized under existing law, the current forces probably would not be eligible for enhanced retirement benefits and might face a loss of pay or even their jobs.

Although DOE rejected federalization as an option in 2009, it recognized that the current contracting approach could be improved by greater standardization and by addressing personnel system issues. As a result, NNSA began a standardization initiative to centralize procurement of equipment, uniforms, and weapons to achieve cost savings. Under a separate initiative, a DOE study group developed a number of recommendations to enhance protective forces’ career longevity and retirement options, but DOE has made limited progress to date in implementing these recommendations.