

Highlights of [GAO-03-804](#), a report to Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Financial Management, the Budget, and International Security, Committee on Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

**Why GAO Did This Study**

Sealed radioactive sources, radioactive material encapsulated in stainless steel or other metal, are used worldwide in medicine, industry, and research. These sealed sources could be a threat to national security because terrorists could use them to make “dirty bombs.” GAO was asked to determine (1) the number of sealed sources in the United States, (2) the number of sealed sources lost, stolen, or abandoned, (3) the effectiveness of federal and state controls over sealed sources, and (4) the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and state efforts since September 11, 2001, to strengthen security of sealed sources.

**What GAO Recommends**

GAO recommends that NRC (1) collaborate with states to determine availability of highest risk sealed sources, (2) determine if owners of certain devices should apply for licenses, (3) modify NRC’s licensing process so sealed sources cannot be purchased until NRC verifies their intended use, (4) ensure that NRC’s evaluation of federal and state programs assess security of sealed sources, and (5) determine how states can participate in implementing additional security measures. NRC stated that some of our recommendations would require statutory changes. We clarified our report language to address this concern. Agreement states and an organization of radiation experts agreed with our recommendations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-804](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-804).

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Gene Aloise at (202) 512-6870 or aloisee@gao.gov.

**NUCLEAR SECURITY**

**Federal and State Action Needed to Improve Security of Sealed Radioactive Sources**

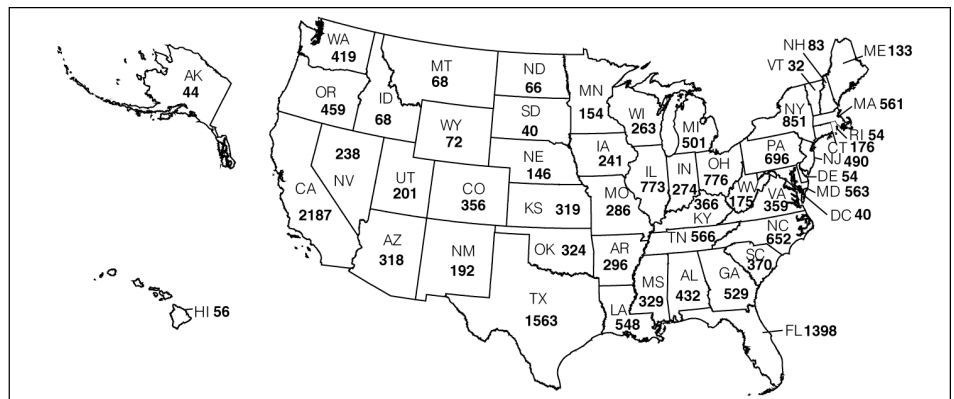
**What GAO Found**

The number of sealed sources in the United States is unknown because NRC and states track numbers of licensees instead of individual sealed sources. Users of certain devices containing sealed sources are not required to apply to NRC for a license. Accounting for these devices has been difficult. In addition, since 1998, more than 1,300 incidents have taken place in the United States where sealed sources have been lost, stolen, or abandoned. The majority of these lost devices were recovered.

Security for sealed sources varied among the facilities GAO visited in 10 states. Also, a potential security weakness exists in NRC’s licensing process to obtain sealed sources. Approved applicants may buy sealed sources as soon as a new license is issued by mail. Because the process assumes that the applicant is acting in good faith and it can take NRC as long as 12 months before conducting an inspection, it is possible that sealed sources can be obtained for malicious intent. In addition, NRC currently evaluates the effectiveness of state regulatory programs, but these evaluations do not assess the security of sealed sources.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, NRC and states have notified licensees of the need for heightened awareness to security, but have not required any specific actions to improve security. NRC has been developing additional security measures since the attacks, and issued the first security order to large facilities that irradiate such items as medical supplies and food on June 5, 2003. Additional orders to licensees that possess high risk sealed sources are expected to follow. NRC and states disagree over the appropriate role of states in efforts to improve security. NRC intends to develop and implement all additional security measures on licensees with sealed sources, including those licensed by states. However, over 80 percent of states responding to our survey feel they should be given responsibility to inspect and enforce security measures.

**Number of Medical, Industrial, and Research Users of Sealed Sources (About 20,000 Total Nationwide) as of December 31, 2002**



Sources: NRC license tracking system and GAO survey of agreement states.