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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-08-285T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Energy (DOE) maintains emergency response capabilities and assets to quickly respond to potential nuclear and radiological threats in the United States. These capabilities are primarily found at DOE's two key emergency response facilities—the Remote Sensing Laboratories at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, and Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland. These capabilities took on increased significance after the attacks of September 11, 2001, because of heightened concern that terrorists may try to detonate a nuclear or radiological device in a major U.S. city. DOE is not the only federal agency responsible for addressing nuclear and radiological threats. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is responsible for preparing the country to prevent and respond to a potential nuclear or radiological attack.

This testimony discusses (1) the benefits of using DOE's aerial background radiation surveys to enhance emergency response capabilities and (2) the physical security measures in place at DOE's two key emergency response facilities and whether they are consistent with DOE guidance. It is based on GAO's report on DOE's nuclear and radiological emergency response capabilities, issued in September 2006 (*Combating Nuclear Terrorism: Federal Efforts to Respond to Nuclear and Radiological Threats and to Protect Emergency Response Capabilities Could be Strengthened* [Washington, D.C.: Sept. 21, 2006]).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-285T](#). For more information, contact Gene Aloise at (202) 512-3841 or [aloise@gao.gov](mailto:aloise@gao.gov).

## COMBATING NUCLEAR TERRORISM

### Federal Efforts to Respond to Nuclear and Radiological Threats and to Protect Key Emergency Response Facilities Could Be Strengthened

#### What GAO Found

DOE has unique capabilities and assets to prevent and respond to a nuclear or radiological attack in the United States. One of these unique capabilities is the ability to conduct aerial background radiation surveys. These surveys can be used to compare changes in radiation levels to (1) help detect radiological threats in U.S. cities more quickly and (2) measure contamination levels after a radiological attack to assist in and reduce the costs of cleanup efforts. Despite the benefits, only one major city has been surveyed. Neither DOE nor DHS has mission responsibility for conducting these surveys. DOE and DHS disagree about which department is responsible for informing cities about the surveys, and funding and conducting surveys if cities request them. In the absence of clear mission responsibility, DOE and DHS have not informed cities about the surveys and have not conducted any additional surveys.

DOE's two Remote Sensing Laboratories are protected at the lowest level of physical security allowed by DOE guidance because, according to DOE, capabilities and assets to prevent and respond to nuclear and radiological emergencies have been dispersed across the country and are not concentrated at the laboratories. However, we found a number of critical capabilities and assets that exist only at the Remote Sensing Laboratories and whose loss would significantly hamper DOE's ability to quickly prevent and respond to a nuclear or radiological emergency. These capabilities include the most highly trained teams for minimizing the consequences of a nuclear or radiological attack and the only helicopters and planes that can readily help locate nuclear or radiological devices or measure contamination levels after a radiological attack. Because these capabilities and assets have not been fully dispersed, current physical security measures may not be sufficient for protecting the facilities against a terrorist attack.

DOE Helicopter Conducting an Aerial Background Radiation Survey



Source: DOE.