


GAO
 Accountability • Integrity • Reliability
Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-03-638](#), a report to the 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 pose 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 worldwide and how many have been reported lost, stolen, or abandoned; (2) the controls, both legislative and regulatory, used by countries that possess sealed sources; and (3) the assistance provided by the Department of Energy (DOE) and other U.S. federal agencies to strengthen other countries’ control over sealed sources and the extent to which these efforts are believed to be effectively implemented.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Energy (1) develop a comprehensive plan for DOE to guide its future efforts, (2) take the lead in developing a governmentwide plan to strengthen controls over other countries’ sealed sources; and (3) strengthen efforts to increase program expenditures in the countries requiring assistance.

DOE agreed with our recommendations to strengthen the program but believes it has fully coordinated with other federal agencies. DOE’s contention is contrary to other agencies’ views.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-638.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Gene Aloise at (202) 512-3841 or aloisee@gao.gov.

NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION

U.S. and International Assistance Efforts to Control Sealed Radioactive Sources Need Strengthening

What GAO Found

The precise number of sealed sources in use is unknown because many countries do not systematically account for them. However, nearly 10 million sealed sources exist in the United States and the 49 countries responding to a GAO survey. There is also limited information about the number of sealed sources that have been lost, stolen, or abandoned, but it is estimated to be in the thousands worldwide. Many of the most vulnerable sealed sources that could pose a security risk are located in the countries of the former Soviet Union.

All of the 49 countries that responded to GAO’s survey reported that they have established legislative or regulatory controls over sealed sources. However, nuclear safety and security experts from DOE, the Departments of State and Defense, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), the International Atomic Energy Agency, and the European Commission told GAO that countries’ controls over sealed sources vary greatly and are weakest among less developed countries.

In fiscal year 2002, DOE established a program focusing on improving the security of sealed sources in the former Soviet Union and has started to fund security upgrades in Russia and other former Soviet countries. The Departments of Defense and State and NRC also have programs to help countries strengthen controls over sealed sources. DOE plans to expand its program to other countries and regions in 2003 and is developing a plan to guide its efforts. However, the department has not fully coordinated its efforts with NRC and the Department of State to ensure that a governmentwide strategy is established. In addition, as of January 2003, the majority of DOE’s program expenditures totaling \$8.9 million were spent by DOE’s national laboratories in the United States.

Abandoned Electrical Generators Containing Large Amounts of Radioactive Strontium-90 in a Former Soviet Union Country



Source: International Atomic Energy Agency.