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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-04-325T, testimony before the Committee on Energy and Commerce and the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

Why GAO Did This Study

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, concerns intensified that terrorists would attempt to smuggle a weapon of mass destruction into the United States. One possible method for terrorists to smuggle such a weapon is to use one of the 7 million cargo containers that arrive at our nation's seaports each year. The Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is responsible for addressing the potential threat posed by the movement of oceangoing cargo containers. Since CBP cannot inspect all arriving cargo containers, it uses a targeting strategy, which includes an automated targeting system. This system targets some containers for inspection based on a perceived level of risk. In this testimony, GAO provides preliminary findings on its assessment of (1) whether CBP's development of its targeting strategy is consistent with recognized key risk management and computer modeling practices and (2) how well the targeting strategy has been implemented at selected seaports around the country.

GAO is completing its assessment and developing recommendations to address strategy development and implementation challenges.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-325T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Richard M. Stana at (202) 512-8777 or StanaR@gao.gov.

HOMELAND SECURITY

Preliminary Observations on Efforts to Target Security Inspections of Cargo Containers

What GAO Found

CBP has taken steps to address the terrorism risks posed by oceangoing cargo containers. These include establishing a National Targeting Center, refining its automated targeting system, instituting a national training program for its personnel that perform targeting, and promulgating regulations to improve the quality and timeliness of data on cargo containers. However, while CBP's strategy incorporates some elements of risk management, it does not include other key elements, such as a comprehensive set of criticality, vulnerability and risk assessments that experts told GAO are necessary to determine risk and the types of responses necessary to mitigate that risk. Also, CBP's targeting system does not include a number of recognized modeling practices, such as subjecting the system to peer review, testing and validation. By incorporating the missing elements of a risk management framework and following certain recognized modeling practices, CBP will be in a better position to protect against terrorist attempts to smuggle weapons of mass destruction into the United States.

CBP faces a number of challenges at the six ports we visited. CBP does not have a national system for reporting and analyzing inspection statistics and the data provided to us by ports were generally not available by risk level, were not uniformly reported, were difficult to interpret, and were incomplete. CBP officials told us they have just implemented a new module for their targeting system, but it is too soon to tell whether it will provide consistent, complete inspection data for analyzing and improving the targeting strategy. In addition, CBP staff that received the national targeting training were not tested or certified to ensure that they had learned the basic skills needed to provide effective targeting. Further, space limitations and safety concerns about inspection equipment constrained the ports in their utilization of screening equipment, which has affected the efficiency of examinations.

A container ship docks at the Miami seaport



Source: Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Department of Homeland Security