



Highlights of [GAO-04-623](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations, House Committee on Government Reform

Why GAO Did This Study

A successful terrorist attack on Department of Energy (DOE) sites containing nuclear weapons or the material used in nuclear weapons could have devastating consequences for the site and its surrounding communities. Because of these risks, DOE needs an effective safeguards and security program. A key component of an effective program is the design basis threat (DBT), a classified document that identifies the potential size and capabilities of terrorist forces. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, rendered the then-current DBT obsolete. GAO examined DOE's response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, identified why DOE took almost 2 years to develop a new DBT, analyzed the higher threat in the new DBT, and identified the remaining issues that need to be resolved in order for DOE to meet the threat contained in the new DBT.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making a series of recommendations to the Secretary of Energy to strengthen DOE's ability to meet the requirements of the new DBT and to strengthen the department's ability to deal with future terrorist threats. DOE did not comment on the specific recommendations, but said that it would consider them as part of its Departmental Management Challenges for 2004.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-623.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

NUCLEAR SECURITY

DOE Needs to Resolve Significant Issues Before It Fully Meets the New Design Basis Threat

What GAO Found

DOE took a series of actions in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. While each of these has been important, DOE must press forward with additional actions to ensure that it is fully prepared to provide a timely and cost effective defense.

- DOE took immediate steps to improve physical security in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. DOE's most visible effort involved moving to higher levels of security readiness, known as security condition (SECON) levels. While this effort has increased the visible deterrence at DOE sites, it has been expensive and has resulted in fatigue, retention problems, and less training for most sites' protective forces. In addition, the effectiveness of these increased SECON levels generally have not been assessed using the vulnerability assessment tools, such as computer modeling and full-scale force-on-force exercises, that DOE routinely uses to develop protective force strategies for its sites.
- Development of the new DBT took almost 2 years because of (1) delays in developing an intelligence community assessment—known as the Postulated Threat—of the terrorist threat to nuclear weapon facilities and (2) DOE's lengthy comment and review process for developing policy. In addition, during the DBT development process, there were sharp debates within DOE and other government organizations over the size and capabilities of future terrorist threats and the availability of resources to meet these threats that contributed to the delay.
- While the May 2003 DBT identifies a larger terrorist threat than did the previous DBT, the threat identified in the new DBT in most cases is less than the threat identified in the intelligence community's Postulated Threat, on which the DBT has been traditionally based. The new DBT identifies new possible terrorist acts such as radiological, chemical, or biological sabotage. However, the criteria that DOE has selected for determining when facilities may need to be protected against these forms of sabotage may not be sufficient.
- DOE has been slow to resolve a number of significant issues, such as issuing additional DBT implementation guidance, developing DBT implementation plans, and developing budgets to support these plans, that may affect the ability of its sites to fully meet the threat contained in the new DBT in a timely fashion. Consequently, DOE's deadline to meet the requirements of the new DBT by the end of fiscal year 2006 is probably not realistic for some sites.