



Highlights of [GAO-07-412](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

U.S. ports are significant to the U.S. economy, handling more than 2 billion tons of domestic and import/export cargo annually. Since Sept. 11, 2001, much of the national focus on ports' preparedness has been on preventing potential acts of terror, the 2005 hurricane season renewed focus on how to protect ports from a diversity of threats, including natural disasters. This report was prepared under the authority of the Comptroller General to examine (1) challenges port authorities have experienced as a result of recent natural disasters, (2) efforts under way to address these challenges, and (3) the manner in which port authorities plan for natural disasters. GAO reviewed documents and interviewed various port stakeholders from 17 major U.S. ports.

What GAO Recommends

To ensure that ports achieve adequate planning for natural disasters, GAO recommends that the Secretary of Homeland Security encourage port stakeholders to use existing forums for discussing all-hazards planning.

DHS, DOT and DOD generally agreed with the facts presented in the report. However, DHS expressed concern about using existing forums for planning. Our work showed that these forums are already being used for planning in several cases which should be further encouraged.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-412.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Katherine Siggerud at (202) 512-6570 or siggerudk@gao.gov.

PORT RISK MANAGEMENT

Additional Federal Guidance Would Aid Ports in Disaster Planning and Recovery

What GAO Found

Ports, particularly those impacted by the 2005 hurricane season, experienced many different kinds of challenges during recent natural disasters. Of the 17 U.S. ports that GAO reviewed, port officials identified communications, personnel, and interagency coordination as their biggest challenges.

Many port authorities have taken steps to address these challenges. Individually, ports have created redundancy in communications systems and other backup equipment and updated their emergency plans. Collectively, the American Association of Port Authorities developed a best practices manual focused on port planning and recovery efforts, as well as lessons learned from recent natural disasters. Even ports that have not experienced problems as a result of recent disasters, but are nonetheless susceptible to disaster threats, have responded to lessons learned by other ports. Additionally, federal maritime agencies, such as the U.S. Coast Guard, the Maritime Administration, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have increased their coordination and communication with ports to strengthen ports' ability to recover from future natural disasters and to build stakeholders' knowledge about federal resources for port recovery efforts.

Most port authorities GAO reviewed conduct planning for natural disasters separately from planning for homeland security threats. Unlike security efforts, natural disaster planning is not subject to the same type of specific federal requirements and, therefore, varies from port to port. As a result of this divided approach, GAO found a wide variance in ports' natural disaster planning efforts including:

- the level of participation in disaster forums, and
- the level of information sharing among port stakeholders

In the absence of appropriate forums and information sharing opportunities among ports, some ports GAO contacted were limited in their understanding of federal resources available for predisaster mitigation and postdisaster recovery. Other ports have begun using existing forums, such as their federally mandated Area Maritime Security Committee, to coordinate disaster planning efforts. Port and industry experts, as well as recent federal actions, are now encouraging an all-hazards approach to disaster planning and recovery. That is, disaster preparedness planning requires that all of the threats faced by the port, both natural (such as hurricanes) and man-made (such as terror events), be considered together. The Department of Homeland Security, which through the Coast Guard oversees the Area Maritime Security Committees, provides an example of how to incorporate a wider scope of activity for ports across the country. Additionally, the Maritime Administration should develop a communication strategy to inform ports of the maritime resources available for recovery efforts.