



Highlights of [GAO-06-639](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Spills of oil and hazardous substances in the St. Clair–Detroit River corridor have degraded this border area between the United States and Canada and are a potential threat to local drinking water supplies. Within the United States such spills are reported to the National Response Center (NRC), and in Canada to the Ontario Spills Action Centre. This report discusses (1) how many oil and hazardous substance spills greater than 50 gallons (or of an unknown volume) were reported in the corridor from 1994 to 2004, and how accurately reported spills reflect the extent of actual spills; (2) what processes are used to notify parties of spills, and if they contain explicit requirements for reporting times and spill magnitude; and (3) the extent of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Coast Guard's spill prevention efforts and enforcement activities in the corridor from 1994 to 2004.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that EPA Region 5 and the Coast Guard's District 9 update spill information and determine whether existing spill notification processes can be improved. GAO also recommends that EPA consider gathering information on which facilities are regulated under its spill prevention program and develop goals for its spill prevention inspections. The Department of Homeland Security agreed with our findings and conclusions overall and EPA provided technical comments only.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-639.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact John B. Stephenson at (202) 512-3841 or stephensonj@gao.gov.

CLEAN WATER

Better Information and Targeted Prevention Efforts Could Enhance Spill Management in the St. Clair–Detroit River Corridor

What GAO Found

The NRC received 991 spill reports and the Ontario Spills Action Centre received 157 reports of spills in the corridor from 1994 through 2004, but these reports do not accurately portray the actual number or volume of spills. Many spills go unreported by responsible parties because they do not understand or fail to comply with reporting requirements. Further, multiple reports for the same spill are often recorded by NRC and provided to EPA and the Coast Guard for investigation. EPA does not remove all duplicate spill reports or update its data after investigating spills. Coast Guard officials update their spill data after investigations but they are unable to update spill volume estimates due to automated system limitations. GAO also found that, according to agency data sets, other events—combined sewer overflows (CSOs) and industrial permit violations—occurred more frequently than spills in the corridor. While data on industrial permit violations and CSOs might be subject to the same limitations as the spill data because the data are self reported and facilities may not report all of these events, spills may be particularly subject to underreporting because they are not part of a structured program as CSOs and industrial permit violations are.

There are multiple parties involved in spill notification in the corridor and agreements outlining U.S.–Canadian notification processes are not explicit about reporting times or the magnitude of spills that warrant notification. The coast guards of each country have agreed to notify one another of spills primarily when a joint response may be needed. Another agreement between Michigan and Ontario officials calls for notifying each other of spills that may have a joint impact. We reviewed six selected spill incidents that illustrate the various ways that notification can occur. The drinking water facility operators we contacted on the U.S. side of the corridor had differing perspectives on current notification processes, and the majority expressed concern that their facilities could be contaminated by spills if they are not notified in a timely manner. Finally, efforts have been made to develop informal notification processes between individual industries or trade associations and drinking water facilities.

EPA's spill prevention program is limited and the Coast Guard addresses spill prevention as part of other compliance efforts. EPA's prevention program addresses only oil spills. Further, EPA is uncertain of which specific facilities are subject to regulation under its spill prevention program, and conducts varying numbers of inspections per year. EPA inspections uncovered significant spill prevention deficiencies, whereas the Coast Guard's inspections revealed minor issues. The agencies issued a total of 16 penalties for spills and program noncompliance during the period we reviewed.