



CHEMICAL AND BIOLOGICAL DEFENSE

U.S. Ability to Meet Protective Suit Inventory Requirements Faces Risk

Highlights of GAO-03-889C, a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Department of Defense (DOD) officials have identified an increasing likelihood that an adversary will use chemical or biological weapons against U.S. forces. Therefore, GAO sought to determine (1) if DOD has a sufficient number of protective suits to meet its stated wartime requirement and (2) if DOD's acquisition approach has affected the risk associated with having insufficient suits.

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes several recommendations to enhance DOD's ability to determine its protective suit inventory requirement and future acquisition approach, such as

- determine the wartime strategy to use as the basis for suit acquisition and funding decisions, and
- reconsider establishing a stockpile of suit components to mitigate the potential time delay between inventory exhaustion and manufacturers' ability to produce sufficient numbers of replacement suits.

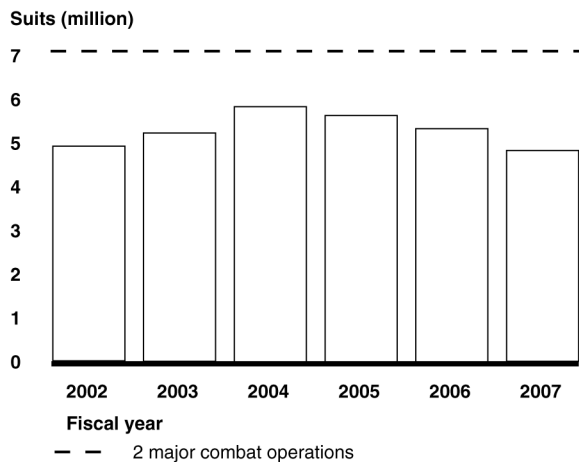
In its comments on a draft of this report, DOD concurred with the recommendations.

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What GAO Found

DOD does not have a sufficient number of protective suits to meet its official wartime requirement as shown below. This requirement will likely increase to include counterterrorism, force protection, and homeland defense contingencies. Calculating the shortage accurately is complicated by DOD's reliance on outdated assumptions to determine wartime consumption rates. Despite recent increases in new suit production, other factors—such as the ongoing expiration of older suits and the consumption of suits during Operation Iraqi Freedom—reduced the available supply of suits, thereby widening the difference between the number of suits required and those on hand. Although DOD is taking action to improve the management of its suit inventory, DOD's existing systems are still unable to provide an accurate accounting, which adversely affects the ability to determine the number of new suits required.

Trends in Suit Production and Current Wartime Requirement



Source: DOD.

DOD's current acquisition approach increases the risk of not having sufficient suits to meet wartime needs. This is occurring because: (1) inconsistent and unpredictable annual funding for suits tends to perpetuate the current cycle of large numbers of suits expiring in some future years; (2) reliance on sole-source, foreign-based suppliers for critical suit components potentially threatens the supply of these components; (3) the ability of suit manufacturers to sustain surge production levels is unclear; (4) in the event of a major conflict, a delay will likely occur between the time current inventories are exhausted and suit manufacturers can surge production sufficiently to meet wartime needs, creating a suit shortage that could adversely affect military operations; and (5) DOD does not maintain a stockpile of the critical suit components.