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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-06-388](#), 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

The nation's commercial nuclear power plants are potential targets for terrorists seeking to cause the release of radioactive material. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), an independent agency headed by five commissioners, is responsible for regulating and overseeing security at the plants. In April 2003, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, NRC revised the design basis threat (DBT), which describes the threat that plants must be prepared to defend against in terms of the number of attackers and their training, weapons, and tactics. NRC has also restructured its program for testing security at the plants through force-on-force inspections, which consist of mock terrorist attacks. GAO was asked to review (1) the process NRC used to revise the DBT for nuclear power plants, (2) the actions nuclear power plants have taken to enhance security in response to the revised DBT, and (3) NRC's progress in strengthening the conduct of force-on-force inspections at the plants.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that NRC improve its process for making changes to the DBT and evaluate and implement measures to further strengthen its force-on-force inspection program. Commenting on the draft report, NRC provided clarifications regarding the process NRC used to revise the DBT, but it neither agreed nor disagreed with GAO's recommendations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-388](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-388).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jim Wells at (202) 512-3841 or [wellsj@gao.gov](mailto:wellsj@gao.gov).

# NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS

## Efforts Made to Upgrade Security, but the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Design Basis Threat Process Should Be Improved

### What GAO Found

NRC revised the DBT for nuclear power plants using a generally logical and well-defined process in which trained threat assessment staff made recommendations for changes based on an analysis of demonstrated terrorist capabilities. The process resulted in a DBT requiring plants to defend against a larger terrorist threat, including a larger number of attackers, a refined and expanded list of weapons, and an increase in the maximum size of a vehicle bomb. Key elements of the revised DBT, such as the number of attackers, generally correspond to the NRC threat assessment staff's original recommendations, but other important elements do not. For example, the NRC staff made changes to some recommendations after obtaining feedback from stakeholders, including the nuclear industry, which objected to certain proposed changes such as the inclusion of certain weapons. NRC officials said the changes resulted from further analysis of intelligence information. Nevertheless, GAO found that the process used to obtain stakeholder feedback created the appearance that changes were made based on what the industry considered reasonable and feasible to defend against rather than on an assessment of the terrorist threat itself.

Nuclear power plants made substantial security improvements in response to the September 11, 2001, attacks and the revised DBT, including security barriers and detection equipment, new protective strategies, and additional security officers. It is too early, however, to conclude that all sites are capable of defending against the DBT because, as of November 1, 2005, NRC had conducted force-on-force inspections at about one-third of the plants.

NRC has improved its force-on-force inspections—for example, by conducting inspections more frequently at each site. Nevertheless, in observing three inspections and discussing the program with NRC, GAO noted potential issues in the inspections that warrant NRC's continued attention. For example, a lapse in the protection of information about the planned scenario for a mock attack GAO observed may have given the plant's security officers knowledge that allowed them to perform better than they otherwise would have. A classified version of this report provides additional details about the DBT and security at nuclear power plants.

**Barrier Designed to Defend against a Vehicle Bomb**



Source: GAO.