

Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2019, the NVDC documented about 230,000 vessels for commercial and recreational purposes in U.S. waters. The Coast Guard requires owners of certain-sized commercial vessels to obtain vessel documentation—a form of vessel registration—through the NVDC. Vessel documentation is optional for owners of recreational vessels of 5 or more net tons (generally longer than 26 feet), and many do so to secure a mortgage for financing. In 2017, GAO reported that the NVDC faced backlogs in processing recreational vessel documentation.

The Frank LoBiondo Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2018 includes a provision for GAO to review NVDC's operations. This report examines, among other objectives, the extent that the Coast Guard (1) met its NVDC workload demands and (2) measured NVDC's effectiveness in processing vessel documentation.

GAO analyzed Coast Guard vessel documentation processing data for fiscal years 2015 through 2019 and information on its system used to process vessel documentation. GAO also interviewed cognizant Coast Guard officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations to the Coast Guard, including that it develop and implement policies and procedures for conducting operational analyses for its vessel documentation system, and establish formal organizational performance targets for NVDC's vessel documentation activities. The Coast Guard concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-21-100](#). For more information, contact Nathan Anderson at (206) 287-4804 or andersonn@gao.gov.

COAST GUARD

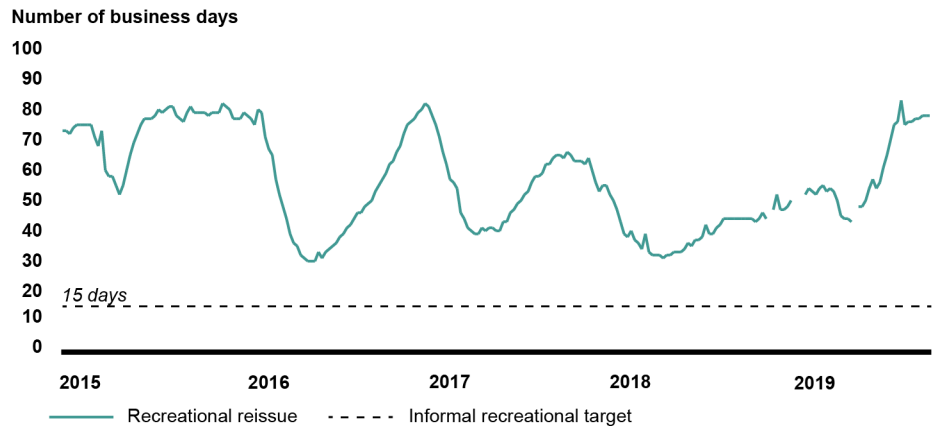
Actions Needed to Improve National Vessel Documentation Center Operations

What GAO Found

In recent years, the Coast Guard's National Vessel Documentation Center (NVDC) met workload demands for timely processing of commercial vessel documentation, but not for recreational vessel documentation. From January 2015 through September 2019, its recreational documentation processing time averaged 57 days—about 4 times longer than its 15-day informal target (see fig.).

- NVDC officials attributed the current backlogs to performance issues with the Coast Guard's information technology system for managing vessel documentation. For example, officials stated that there were periods where system performance issues left only about 11 percent of NVDC staff able to access the system, limiting their ability to meet their workload demands.
- The Coast Guard has generally not conducted operational analyses of its vessel documentation system since 2012. Such analyses are required annually for information technology systems to help ensure they perform as intended. By developing and implementing policies and procedures to ensure the Coast Guard conducts required operational analyses for the system, it will better ensure that potential system performance issues are being addressed on a timely basis.

Coast Guard National Vessel Documentation Center (NVDC) Processing Time for Issuing Recreational Vessel Documentation, January 2015 through September 2019



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-21-100

Note: Recreational reissue—which refers to applications from recreational vessel owners to change owners or the vessel's hailing port—is the most common type of recreational vessel documentation. The gaps in the figure during 2018 and 2019 are due to the system used to generate the data being unavailable for those points in time.

The Coast Guard has not measured the NVDC's effectiveness in processing vessel documentation. The service requires its units to report their performance to leadership. However, the NVDC uses an informal target to measure staff timeliness in processing documentation. It has not established formal targets to measure its overall performance. Establishing formal organizational performance targets for its vessel documentation activities—such as quantifiable goals for timeliness and accuracy—would provide the NVDC with a clear baseline by which to measure its effectiveness.