



Highlights of GAO-10-446, a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Billions of pounds of cargo are transported on U.S. passenger flights annually. The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is the primary federal agency responsible for securing the air cargo system. The 9/11 Commission Act of 2007 mandated DHS to establish a system to screen 100 percent of cargo flown on passenger aircraft by August 2010. As requested, GAO reviewed TSA's progress in meeting the act's screening mandate, and any related challenges it faces for both domestic (cargo transported within and from the United States) and inbound cargo (cargo bound for the United States). GAO reviewed TSA's policies and procedures, interviewed TSA officials and air cargo industry stakeholders, and conducted site visits at five U.S. airports, selected based on size, among other factors.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that TSA establish milestones for a staffing study, verify the accuracy of all reported screening data, develop a contingency plan for screening domestic cargo, and develop plans for meeting the mandate as it applies to inbound cargo. TSA partially concurred with verifying screening data and did not concur with developing a contingency plan because it did not believe such actions were feasible. GAO believes these recommendations remain valid, as discussed in this report. TSA agreed with all other recommendations.

[View GAO-10-446 or key components.](#)
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AVIATION SECURITY

TSA Has Made Progress but Faces Challenges in Meeting the Statutory Mandate for Screening Air Cargo on Passenger Aircraft

What GAO Found

TSA has made progress in meeting the air cargo screening mandate as it applies to domestic cargo, but faces challenges in doing so that highlight the need for a contingency plan. TSA has, for example, increased required domestic cargo screening levels from 50 percent in February 2009 to 75 percent in May 2010, increased the amount of cargo subject to screening by eliminating many domestic screening exemptions, created a voluntary program to allow screening to take place at various points in the air cargo supply chain, conducted outreach to familiarize industry stakeholders with screening requirements, and tested air cargo screening technologies. However, TSA faces several challenges in developing and implementing a system to screen 100 percent of domestic air cargo, and it is questionable, based on reported screening rates, whether 100 percent of such cargo will be screened by August 2010 without impeding the flow of commerce. For example, shipper participation in the voluntary screening program has been lower than targeted by TSA. In addition, TSA has not completed a staffing study to determine the number of inspectors needed to oversee the screening program. Because it is unclear how many industry stakeholders will join the program, TSA could benefit from establishing milestones to complete a staffing study to help ensure that it has the resources it needs under different scenarios. Moreover, TSA faces technology challenges that could affect its ability to meet the screening mandate. Among these, there is no technology approved by TSA to screen large pallets or containers of cargo, which suggests the need for alternative approaches to screening such cargo. TSA also does not verify the self-reported data submitted by screening participants. Several of these challenges suggest the need for a contingency plan, in case the agency's current initiatives are not successful in meeting the mandate without impeding the flow of commerce. However, TSA has not developed such a plan. Addressing these issues could better position TSA to meet the mandate.

TSA has made some progress in meeting the screening mandate as it applies to inbound cargo by taking steps to increase the percentage of screened inbound cargo—including working to understand the screening standards of other nations and coordinating with them to mutually strengthen their respective security efforts. Nevertheless, challenges remain and TSA does not expect to achieve 100 percent screening of inbound air cargo by the mandated August 2010 deadline. TSA officials estimate that air carriers are meeting the current mandated screening level of 50 percent of inbound cargo based on estimates rather than on actual data as required by law. Thus, TSA cannot verify if mandated screening levels are being met. In addition, the agency has not determined how it will eventually meet the screening mandate as it applies to inbound cargo; developing such a plan could better position TSA to assess its progress toward meeting the mandate.