

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-686T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Threats to the homeland and major disasters and emergencies, such as hurricanes and wildfires, are frequently unpredictable or occur with little or no notice. DOD is often expected to play a prominent role supporting civil authorities and must be prepared to provide rapid response when called upon during disasters and declared emergencies (both natural and man-made). DOD also must provide support for restoring public health and services and civil order; support for national special security events; and periodic planned support. DOD provides this support to the American people through its defense support of civil authorities mission.

In this statement, GAO describes progress DOD has made in implementing recommendations to strengthen (1) DOD's strategy, plans, and guidance; (2) interagency coordination; and, (3) capabilities to support civil authorities. This testimony is primarily based on GAO products issued from March 2010 through December 2014 that examined DOD's support of civil authorities mission. In June 2015 GAO obtained selected updates about DOD's support of civil authorities mission.

What GAO Recommends

GAO previously made recommendations to help DOD address management challenges or gaps in guidance regarding support of civil authorities. In response, the agency has taken some steps and plans to do more.

View [GAO-15-686T](#). For more information, contact Joseph Kirschbaum at (202) 512-9971 or kirschbaumj@gao.gov.

June 10, 2015

CIVIL SUPPORT

DOD Is Taking Action to Strengthen Support of Civil Authorities

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) has taken action to address GAO's prior recommendations to strengthen its strategy, plans and guidance for support of civil authorities. As GAO has reported, clear, current, and complete strategies, plans, and guidance are important for reflecting the direction of the department's leadership, defining DOD policies and responsibilities, and sharing practices that could facilitate effective support of civil authorities. In October 2012, GAO found DOD had not developed guidance for the use of dual-status commanders (active-duty military or National Guard officers who were authorized to command both state and federal personnel) for incidents affecting multiple states and territories. For example, DOD had no specific criteria and conditions for when and how state governors and the Secretary of Defense would mutually appoint a commander. In September 2013, GAO found that DOD did not have a clear command-and-control structure for managing complex catastrophes across multiple states because DOD had not identified roles, responsibilities, and relationships among command elements. GAO recommended in both reports that DOD update and implement better guidance. DOD has partially addressed GAO's recommendations by updating its strategy and guidance, and the department is drafting an instruction on dual-status commanders.

DOD also has taken action to address GAO's prior recommendations to strengthen the department's interagency coordination. It is critical that DOD coordinate and synchronize its civil support mission to engage with a broad range of interagency partners it may need to support, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Customs and Border Protection. Previously, GAO reported on three areas DOD can focus on to enhance interagency coordination: clearly define roles and responsibilities, communicate DOD's approach toward interagency partners, and implement key practices for managing liaisons with partners. GAO found that roles and responsibilities for support to law enforcement—including Joint Task Force-North, which provides civil support along U.S. borders—were unclear. GAO also found that DOD did not have complete situational awareness of 110 liaisons detailed to the Department of Homeland Security headquarters. To improve interagency coordination, GAO recommended that DOD issue and update civil-support guidance. Subsequently, DOD addressed GAO's recommendations by issuing guidance and other documents, such as the 2011 Interagency Partner Guide.

Additionally, DOD has taken action to address GAO's prior recommendations to improve its identification of capabilities for support of civil authorities. In the 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review*, DOD notes that the key pillar of protecting the homeland includes sustaining capabilities to assist U.S. civil authorities. In 2013, GAO found two combatant commands had not identified civil-support capabilities because they were waiting until FEMA completed planning efforts in 2018. GAO recommended that DOD develop an interim set of specific capabilities that could be provided to prepare for and respond to complex catastrophes. DOD concurred with GAO's recommendation and DOD officials reported as of June 2015 that Northern Command and Pacific Command had updated their plans to incorporate complex catastrophes, including identifying capabilities that would be available to the lead federal agency during such an event.