

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-191T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Preventing terrorists from smuggling nuclear or radiological materials into the United States is a top national priority. To address this threat, DHS has deployed radiation detection equipment and trained staff to use it. CBP conducts covert operations to test capabilities for detecting and interdicting nuclear and radiological materials at air, land, and sea ports of entry into the United States as well as checkpoints.

This testimony addresses the extent to which (1) CBP covert operations assessed capabilities at air, land, and sea ports and checkpoints to detect and interdict nuclear and radiological material smuggled across the border and (2) CBP reported its covert operations results and provided oversight to ensure that corrective actions were implemented.

This statement is based on a September 2014 report (GAO-14-826) and selected updates as of October 2015. In conducting that work, GAO analyzed documents, such as test summaries, directives, and planning and guidance papers and interviewed DHS and CBP officials. We also interviewed officials from the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office (DNDO).

What GAO Recommends

GAO previously recommended DHS use a risk assessment to inform priorities for covert test operations, determine time frames and address barriers for reporting results, and track corrective actions. DHS concurred with the recommendations and reported actions underway to address them. GAO is not making any new recommendations in this testimony.

View [GAO-16-191T](#). For more information, contact David Maurer at (202) 512-8777 or maurerd@gao.gov.

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COMBATING NUCLEAR SMUGGLING

Risk-Informed Covert Assessments and Oversight of Corrective Actions Could Strengthen Capabilities at the Border

What GAO Found

In its September 2014 report, GAO reported that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) U.S. Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) Operational Field Testing Division (OFTD) conducted 144 covert operations at 86 locations from fiscal years 2006 through 2013. OFTD selected these locations from a total of 655 U.S. air, land, and sea port facilities; checkpoints; and certain international locations. The results of these operations showed differences in the rates of success for interdicting smuggled nuclear and radiological materials across facility types. OFTD officials stated that the results of its covert operations could be used to assess capabilities at the individual locations tested; but not across all U.S. ports of entry and permanent checkpoints.

GAO also reported that CBP had not conducted a risk assessment to inform and prioritize factors, such as locations, and types of nuclear materials and technologies to be tested in covert operations. CBP had a \$1 million budget for covert operations of various activities—including nuclear and radiological testing—from fiscal years 2009 through 2013. Given limited resources, assessing risk to prioritize the most dangerous materials, most vulnerable locations, and most critical equipment for testing through covert operations, could help DHS inform its decisions on how to use its limited resources effectively. DHS agreed with GAO's recommendation to use a risk assessment to inform priorities for covert test operations, but the recommendation remains open. As of October 2015, CBP officials stated that they developed a threat matrix to help determine the sea ports of entry at the highest risk of nuclear and radiological smuggling, but had not completed its assessments for air and land ports of entry.

Finally, GAO reported that OFTD had not issued reports annually as planned on covert operation results and recommendations, which limited CBP oversight for improving capabilities to detect and interdict smuggling at the border. At the time, OFTD had issued three reports on the results of its covert operations at U.S. ports of entry since 2007. However, OFTD officials stated that because of resource constraints, reports had not been timely and did not include the results of covert tests conducted at checkpoints. GAO further reported that OFTD tracked the status of corrective actions taken in response to findings in these reports, but did not track corrective actions identified from their individual covert operations that were not included in these reports. Establishing appropriate time frames and addressing barriers for reporting covert operations results, and developing a mechanism to track all corrective actions would help enhance CBP's accountability for its covert testing and could help inform CBP about further equipment or training required to protect U.S. borders. DHS agreed with GAO recommendations to determine timeframes and address barriers for reporting results, and to track corrective actions; stating that it would address them by April 2015 and December 2014, respectively. As of October 2015, these recommendations remain open as CBP works to fully implement or document actions taken. CBP officials stated they have issued a standard operating procedure containing reporting timeframes, but have not finalized a directive to address this recommendation. GAO is awaiting documentation to demonstrate that CBP is using the database it developed for tracking corrective actions.