

BORDER SECURITY

Partnership Agreements and Enhanced Oversight Could Strengthen Coordination of Efforts on Indian Reservations

Why GAO Did This Study

Individuals seeking to enter the United States illegally may attempt to avoid screening procedures at ports of entry by crossing the border in areas between these ports, including Indian reservations, many of which have been vulnerable to illicit cross-border threat activity, such as drug smuggling, according to DHS. GAO was asked to review DHS's efforts to coordinate border security activities on Indian reservations. This report examines DHS's efforts to coordinate with tribal governments to address border security threats and vulnerabilities on Indian reservations. GAO interviewed DHS officials at headquarters and conducted interviews with eight tribes, selected based on factors such as proximity to the border, and the corresponding DHS field offices that have a role in border security for these Indian reservations. While GAO cannot generalize its results from these interviews to all Indian reservations and field offices along the border, they provide examples of border security coordination issues. This is a public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in December 2012. Information that DHS, the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of the Interior (DOI) deemed sensitive has been redacted.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS examine the benefits of government-to-government agreements with tribes and develop and implement a mechanism to monitor border security coordination efforts with tribes. DHS concurred with our recommendations.

View [GAO-13-352](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gablerr@gao.gov

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is coordinating in a variety of ways with tribes, such as through joint operations and shared facilities and Operation Stonegarden—a DHS grant program intended to enhance coordination among local, tribal, territorial, state, and federal law enforcement agencies in securing United States borders. However, the Border Patrol and tribes face coordination challenges. Officials from five tribes reported information-sharing challenges with the Border Patrol, such as not receiving notification of federal activity on their lands. Border Patrol officials reported challenges navigating tribal rules and decisions. Border Patrol and DHS have existing agreements with some, but not all, tribes to address specific border security issues, such as for the establishment of a law enforcement center on tribal lands. These agreements could serve as models for developing additional agreements between the Border Patrol and other tribes on their specific border security coordination challenges. Written government-to-government agreements could assist Border Patrol and tribal officials with enhancing their coordination, consistent with practices for sustaining effective coordination. DHS established an office to coordinate the components' tribal outreach efforts, which has taken actions such as monthly teleconferences with DHS tribal liaisons to discuss tribal issues and programs, but does not have a mechanism for monitoring and overseeing outreach efforts, consistent with internal control standards. Such monitoring should be performed continually; ingrained in the agency's operations; and clearly documented in directives, policies, or manuals to help ensure operations are carried out as intended. Implementing an oversight mechanism could help enhance DHS's department-wide awareness of and accountability for border security coordination efforts with the tribes while identifying those areas that work well and any needing improvement.