

Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2014, DOD facilitated the transport by commercial motor carriers (private-sector trucking companies) of nearly 50,000 separate shipments of security-sensitive material (e.g., ammunition and explosives) in the continental United States. DOD uses DOT safety performance information to determine whether these carriers can transport security-sensitive material under the TPS program.

The House Report 113-446 included a provision for GAO to assess matters related to the safety performance, standards, and other aspects of TPS carriers. This report examines the extent to which (1) DOD's use of DOT's safety performance information results in sufficient and reliable information for DOD to evaluate the safety performance of individual TPS carriers, and (2) DOD evaluates TPS carrier incident data and investigates incidents to identify safety-related risks. GAO analyzed DOT and DOD safety performance data on the 55 carriers participating in the TPS program in fiscal years 2011-14.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommendations include that DOD establish an approach for reviewing available safety violation data, and develop guidance on analyzing incident trends and fully investigating incidents. DOD concurred with the recommendations on analyzing and investigating incidents but did not concur with the violations data recommendation because DOD stated that it does not own the data, the data do not distinguish TPS from non-TPS shipments, and research is needed on other data. GAO believes the recommendation remains valid.

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DEFENSE TRANSPORTATION

DOD Needs to Improve the Evaluation of Safety and Performance Information for Carriers Transporting Security-Sensitive Materials

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense's (DOD) use of the Department of Transportation's (DOT) safety performance information does not fully result in sufficient and reliable information to evaluate the safety performance of individual commercial motor carriers that transport security-sensitive materials under the Transportation Protective Service (TPS) program. DOT uses data from roadside inspections, crash investigations, and other sources to assign carriers overall Safety Ratings and relative Safety Measurement System (SMS) scores. The SMS scores track safety performance in several areas such as hazardous materials compliance and vehicle maintenance, and range from 0 to 100, where 100 indicates the worst relative safety performance. From November 2012 through October 2014, DOD maintained TPS carriers with absent or dated DOT Safety Ratings. However, DOD conducts its own inspections of TPS carriers, which partially compensates for this issue. DOD officials told GAO that all inspected carriers passed. In February 2014, GAO reported that SMS scores for many commercial carriers may not be reliable indicators of safety performance because they were based on insufficient information, such as infrequent inspections. Consequently, GAO recommended that DOT revise the methodology for determining these scores. DOT did not concur, but stated that it would continue to improve the effectiveness of the SMS methodology. In this review, GAO found that many TPS carriers' SMS scores were subject to similar limitations. However, DOD is not using a rich source of publicly available violation data to evaluate TPS carriers—data that include, for example, violations related to a driver's use of controlled substances while transporting hazardous materials. Absent an approach to review available violation data, DOD is not well-positioned to effectively evaluate the carriers it entrusts to transport security-sensitive material.

DOD collects incident data involving TPS carriers of security-sensitive materials but does not evaluate the data to determine whether systemic trends and patterns are linked to safety risks and does not fully investigate incidents to determine root causes. For example, mechanical breakdown incidents have resulted in delays and increased the exposure of security-sensitive material to the general public. DOD has not analyzed TPS carrier incident information to identify any trends because there is no guidance requiring it to do so. GAO's analysis of 749 mechanical breakdown incidents from fiscal years 2011 to 2014 found that 98 percent of the TPS carriers that had mechanical breakdowns while transporting the highest risk materials such as stinger missiles and grenades stopped for more than 2 hours. Further, in some cases such as when a fire occurs, DOD may conduct an investigation, but DOD does not generally conduct full investigations of security-sensitive shipments because there is no department-wide guidance that requires comprehensive investigations of incidents involving commercial carriers with security-sensitive materials. Also, for 3 of the 4 incidents DOD investigated since fiscal year 2012, DOD did not identify the root causes to prevent recurrences due to the lack of department-wide guidance. Without department-wide guidance requiring the evaluation of TPS incident data to identify trends and the investigation of incidents including determination of the root causes, it will be difficult for DOD to consistently and effectively identify safety risks that could help reduce future incidents.