

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-214](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Thousands of shipments containing radiological material enter the United States each year through airports across the country. Radiological material is used in various medical and industrial applications, and possession requires a license from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) or one of the 37 states to which NRC has relinquished licensing authority. Failure to verify the licenses could allow terrorists to acquire radiological material for a dirty bomb, which uses explosives to disperse the material.

GAO was asked to review CBP policies and procedures related to license verification. This report examines, among other things, (1) the extent to which CBP follows its policies and procedures, and (2) the effectiveness of these policies and procedures. GAO reviewed relevant policies and procedures, analyzed CBP data related to radiological material shipments and license verification, interviewed CBP and NRC officials, and selected four airports to visit based on expected traffic of radiological shipments.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that CBP develop a monitoring system to help ensure that CBP officials comply with the agency's license verification policy, conduct an assessment to determine relevant information that is not included in the automated alerts, and develop a system that allows it to identify shipments of greatest risk. CBP concurred with GAO's three recommendations and outlined actions to implement those recommendations.

View [GAO-18-214](#). For more information, contact David Trimble at (202) 512-3841 or trimbled@gao.gov.

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NUCLEAR SECURITY

CBP Needs to Take Action to Ensure Imported Radiological Material Is Properly Licensed

What GAO Found

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agency officials at U.S. airports have not verified the legitimacy of all licenses for imported radiological materials as required by CBP's policy. The policy requires CBP officials, when alerted, to verify licenses by calling experts in a centralized CBP office. CBP officials at two of four airports GAO visited said they were calling as required. However, CBP officials at the other two airports did not verify many licenses from January 1, 2015, through September 30, 2016, and headquarters officials were unaware of non-compliance with CBP policy. Also, GAO found that during this time frame nationwide, CBP officials were alerted to verify licenses for a significant number of shipments of licensable radiological material for all U.S. airports, but they did not make all the required calls—leaving numerous shipments potentially unverified over this 21-month period. This situation occurred because CBP does not have a monitoring system to ensure that officials make license verification calls as required. Until CBP develops a monitoring system for license verification, it will not have reasonable assurance that it can identify activities inconsistent with its policy and take corrective action.

CBP procedures cannot effectively implement the agency's policy that its officials verify all radiological material shipments imported into the United States. The procedures are not effective for this policy in part because they rely on automated alerts that are based on some but not all relevant information that could indicate potentially dangerous radiological material. Consequently, CBP's current system and procedures cannot ensure that all such materials will be identified. Under federal internal control standards, agencies are to design control activities to achieve objectives and respond to risks. However, CBP does not have the information it needs to develop a robust system or revise its procedures because it has not conducted a comprehensive assessment of the information not included in its automated alert system. In particular, CBP has not assessed relevant information not currently included in the automated alert or how to create a more risk-based approach that distinguishes between higher- and lower-risk quantities of radiological materials. Without such an assessment, CBP may be unable to develop a system or procedures that best support its policy for verifying imported radiological materials.

This is a public version of a sensitive report GAO issued in September 2017. Information CBP deemed sensitive has been omitted.