

Why GAO Did This Study

The challenges of securing the U.S.-Canadian border involve the coordination of multiple partners. The results of the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) efforts to integrate border security among its components and across federal, state, local, tribal, and Canadian partners are unclear. GAO was asked to address the extent to which DHS has (1) improved coordination with state, local, tribal, and Canadian partners; (2) progressed in addressing past federal coordination challenges; and (3) progressed in securing the northern border and used coordination efforts to address existing vulnerabilities. GAO reviewed interagency agreements, strategies, and operational documents that address DHS's reported northern border vulnerabilities such as terrorism. GAO visited four Border Patrol sectors, selected based on threat, and interviewed officials from federal, state, local, tribal, and Canadian agencies operating within these sectors. While these results cannot be generalized, they provided insights on border security coordination.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that DHS enhance oversight to ensure efficient use of interagency forums and compliance with interagency agreements; and develop guidance to integrate partner resources to mitigate northern border vulnerabilities. DHS concurred with our recommendations.

View [GAO-11-97](#) or key components. For more information, contact Rich Stana at (202) 512-8777 or stana@gao.gov.

BORDER SECURITY

Enhanced DHS Oversight and Assessment of Interagency Coordination Is Needed for the Northern Border

What GAO Found

According to a majority of selected northern border security partners GAO interviewed, DHS improved northern border security coordination through interagency forums and joint operations. Specifically, interagency forums were beneficial in establishing a common understanding of security, while joint operations helped to achieve an integrated and effective law enforcement response. However, numerous partners cited challenges related to the inability to resource the increasing number of interagency forums and raised concerns that some efforts may be overlapping. While guidance issued by GAO stresses the need for a process to ensure that resources are used effectively and efficiently, DHS does not oversee the interagency forums established by its components. DHS oversight could help prevent possible duplication of efforts and conserve resources.

DHS component officials reported that federal agency coordination to secure the northern border was improved, but partners in all four sectors GAO visited cited ongoing challenges sharing information and resources for daily border security related to operations and investigations. DHS has established and updated interagency agreements, but oversight by management at the component and local level has not ensured consistent compliance with provisions of these agreements, such as those related to information sharing, in areas GAO visited. As a result, according to DHS officials, field agents have been left to resolve coordination challenges. Ongoing DHS-level oversight and attention to enforcing accountability of established agreements could help address long-standing coordination challenges between DHS components, and further the DHS strategic vision for a coordinated homeland security enterprise.

Border Patrol—a component of DHS's U.S. Customs and Border Protection—reported that 32 of the nearly 4,000 northern border miles in fiscal year 2010 had reached an acceptable level of security and that there is a high reliance on law enforcement support from outside the border zone. However, the extent of partner law enforcement resources available to address border security vulnerabilities is not reflected in Border Patrol's processes for assessing border security and resource requirements. GAO previously reported that federal agencies should identify resources among collaborating agencies to deliver results more efficiently and that DHS had not fully responded to a legislative requirement to link initiatives—including partnerships—to existing border vulnerabilities to inform federal resource allocation decisions. Development of policy and guidance to integrate available partner resources in northern border security assessments and resource planning documents could provide the agency and Congress with more complete information necessary to make resource allocation decisions in mitigating existing border vulnerabilities.