

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-13-603](#), a report to Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees and Border Security, Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate.

Why GAO Did This Study

Trade with Mexico is important to the United States' economy. Most of this trade crosses the border by truck, and studies have shown that long waits at border crossings can negatively affect the U.S. economy. CBP is responsible for securing U.S. borders at ports of entry to prevent illegal entry of persons and contraband while also facilitating legitimate trade and travel. GAO was asked to examine CBP data on and actions taken to address wait times at southwest border crossings. This report addresses the extent to which (1) CBP wait time data are reliable for public reporting and informing CBP decisions, (2) CBP has identified infrastructure and staffing needed to process current commercial traffic volumes, and (3) CBP performance measures assess progress toward its trade facilitation goal. GAO assessed the reliability of CBP's wait time data; visited six land border crossings (not generalizable, but selected largely for high traffic volume); analyzed CBP documentation, including needs assessments; and interviewed stakeholders and CBP officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that CBP (1) determine and take steps to help ensure consistent implementation of existing wait time data collection methodologies, (2) assess the feasibility of replacing current methodologies with automated methods, (3) document its staff allocation process and rationale, and (4) develop outcome-oriented performance measures. DHS agreed with these four recommendations and identified steps to address them, although the planned actions will not address the intent of one.

View [GAO-13-603](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or rgambler@gao.gov.

July 2013

U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

CBP Action Needed to Improve Wait Time Data and Measure Outcomes of Trade Facilitation Efforts

What GAO Found

Within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), U.S. Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) data on commercial vehicle wait times—the time it takes to travel from the end of the queue to the CBP primary inspection point at land border crossings—are unreliable for public reporting and CBP management decisions across border crossings. These data—which are collected manually by CBP officers—are unreliable because CBP officers inconsistently implement an approved data collection methodology, and the methodologies used vary by crossing. For example, five of the six crossings GAO visited require observation of the end of the queue to estimate wait times, but officials at these crossings reported the lines extended beyond their view at times. As a result, these data are generally not used by the private sector and are of limited usefulness for CBP management decisions on staffing and infrastructure investments. Determining and taking steps to help CBP officials overcome challenges to consistent implementation of existing methodologies could improve the reliability and usefulness of CBP's current wait time data. CBP officials have identified automated wait time data collection technology as the best way to improve data reliability. The Department of Transportation (DOT), in coordination with state DOTs and CBP, has ongoing pilot projects to use technology to gather more reliable wait time data at some border crossings. However, CBP has not assessed the feasibility of replacing current methods with automated data collection. Doing so, consistent with program management standards, could help CBP determine how to best improve data reliability.

CBP officials report and analyses indicate infrastructure and staff needs, but documenting CBP's staff allocation process could improve transparency and facilitate review and validation by CBP and others. CBP officials and analyses identify needs for additional infrastructure—such as more lanes—at some crossings, and GAO analysis of CBP data on lane use generally supported agency views on the extent to which CBP opens lanes at the six crossings GAO visited. Further, GAO analysis of lane use and traffic volume data generally supported CBP officials' statements that they open and close primary inspection lanes in response to fluctuations in commercial traffic volume. CBP analyses identified a need for 3,811 additional officers, and CBP headquarters officials told GAO all southwest border ports require additional staff, but CBP field and port managers at three of six crossings GAO visited reported having sufficient staff. CBP human capital officials reported that they adjust staff allocations across locations to better ensure that staff levels match areas of greatest need, but CBP has not documented this process, and there is no guidance defining the methodology used or factors considered when allocating staff across ports. Documenting this process, consistent with internal control standards, could improve transparency, helping CBP and others to better ensure that scarce staff resources are effectively allocated to fulfill mission needs across ports.

CBP does not have outcome-oriented performance measures to determine the extent to which the agency is facilitating trade. The Office of Management and Budget and GAO guidance recommend using outcome-oriented measures to promote accountability for results. In the absence of such measures, it is difficult for the agency or others to gauge CBP's progress in meeting its stated goal of facilitating trade.