CRS Issue Statement on Critical Infrastructure Security

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January 12, 2010
The nation’s health, wealth, security, and quality of life rely on the production and
distribution of certain goods and services (safe drinking water, electricity, fuels, etc.). The
array of physical assets, processes, information, and people that facilitate this production
and distribution have been referred to as the nation’s critical infrastructure. Following the terrorist
attacks of September 11, 2001, government at all levels has focused greater attention on the
vulnerability of critical infrastructure and on how best to enhance its protection.

The federal government has taken on the responsibility of working with the owners and operators
of critical infrastructure (both public and private) to determine which of their assets are the most
critical to the nation as whole, to assess the vulnerability of these assets to a variety of threats, to
determine the risks involved, to develop options for reducing those risks, and to implement the
most cost-effective risk-reduction options. Although there is a range of regulatory intervention
already in place across the various critical infrastructure sectors, national policy states that the
federal government should strive to encourage owners and operators to take proactive, market-
based actions to protect these assets. However, the federal government is willing to intervene
(through regulation or incentives) in those cases where owners and operators are unwilling or
unable to adequately protect nationally critical assets. The federal government has also assumed
the responsibility of assisting state and local governments and some private sector entities protect
assets that are important locally, but which may not be critical to the nation as a whole. While
many federal agencies play a role, Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD) No. 7
makes the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) the lead agency in coordinating this national
effort.

Congressional activity is focused primarily on oversight of the various programs within DHS and
elsewhere that implement this basic strategy. In particular, Congress is concerned about the
progress and effectiveness of activities associated with identifying and assessing assets of
national importance and prioritizing the allocation of federal resources (including the process by
which DHS allocates critical infrastructure protection funds to states and localities). Congress is
also interested in the effectiveness of information sharing mechanisms established among the
various stakeholders. Congress also may develop legislation to address perceived shortcomings.
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