

GAO

Testimony

Before the Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. Senate, and the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, House of Representatives

Tuesday, December 10, 2002

DIFFUSE SECURITY
THREATS

Information on U.S.
Domestic Anthrax Attacks

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Joint Committee:

As you requested in your letter of October 31, 2002, we are pleased to submit our statement for the record on the anthrax threat. We collected this information as part of several ongoing and completed projects dealing with the anthrax threat, the anthrax vaccine, and technologies to detect and identify anthrax spores,¹ that is, anthrax in a powder form. As you requested, my testimony will focus on the following questions: (1) How easy is it to produce and weaponize anthrax? (2) What studies were conducted to test mail as a weapon delivery system? And (3) what is the status of the United States Postal Service's (USPS) efforts to detect anthrax in the mail? You also requested that we provide an overview of federal law enforcement agencies' initial investigation in response to the October 2001 anthrax attack and how these agencies are preparing for similar incidents in the future.

In conducting our work on anthrax production processes, we identified and consulted with a wide range of current and retired experts in anthrax and biological weapons production processes from the U.S. Army's Dugway Proving Grounds, Utah, a principal site of biological weapons testing; the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, Ft. Detrick, Maryland; the Institute of Genomic Research, Bethesda, Maryland; the University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona; and the United Kingdom.

In conducting our work on USPS's efforts to detect anthrax in the mail, we reviewed documents associated with USPS efforts to procure anthrax detection devices, met with USPS officials, and also met with industry experts and vendors representing the technologies USPS is considering. We also met with officials of the Canadian Defense Research Establishment Suffield (DRES) and observed the results of their tests of anthrax in mail in an office setting.

Finally, in conducting our work on how law enforcement agencies responded to the October 2001 anthrax attack, we contacted representatives from the Federal Emergency Management Agency; the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Office of Criminal

¹See U.S. General Accounting Office, *Diffuse Security Threats: Technologies for Mail Sanitization Exist, but Challenges Remain*, GAO-02-365 (Washington, D.C.: April 23, 2002) and *Diffuse Security Threats: USPS Air Filtration Systems Need More Testing and Cost Benefit Analysis before Implementation*, GAO-02-838 (Washington, D.C.: August 22, 2002).

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Enforcement, Forensics and Training (OCEFT); the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Weapons of Mass Destruction Unit and Washington Field Office; USPS's Manager for Environmental Management, Incident Commander for the Brentwood facility, and Postal Inspector; and the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Public Health Preparedness and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The work on which this statement is based began in November 2001 and has continued through November 2002, and it was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Background

As of October 2002, intelligence assessments have not changed since 1990 for chemical and biological warfare threats on the battlefield or by terrorists. This is especially true, intelligence analysts told us, in terms of the numbers of countries suspected of developing anthrax spores, the types of biological agents these countries are known to possess, and their ability to weaponize and deliver such agents.² Unfortunately, for assessing a similar nonbattlefield threat, there are no current data on which to base an estimate apart from data on the October 2001 attack.

As to the terrorist threat, according to officials at the State Department's Diplomatic Security and at the Central Intelligence Agency, no clear evidence exists at this time that U.S. missions or interests overseas are threatened by foreign states or terrorist attacks using chemical and biological agents. According to these officials, terrorist attacks involving the use of conventional bombs are considered the greatest threat to U.S. overseas missions.³

In 1998, at least 12 U.S. abortion clinics received letters that claimed to contain anthrax powder, followed by more than 35 such letters in 1999 and over 30 in 2000. All of these were found to be hoaxes. In addition, DOD committed to a program on December 15, 1997, to vaccinate the entire military because it considered anthrax powder to be a major battlefield

²See also U.S. General Accounting Office, *Medical Readiness: Safety and Efficacy of the Anthrax Vaccine*, GAO/T-NSIAD-99-148 (Washington, D.C.: April 29, 1999).

³See U.S. General Accounting Office, *State Department: Serious Problems in the Anthrax Vaccine Immunization Program*, GAO-01-21 (December 13, 2000).

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