

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107159](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Over 300 American coastal, Great Lakes, and inland water-side ports are critical to national and local economies, handling over \$2.28 trillion of U.S. international trade in 2022. Freight that arrives at a port reaches its final destination using “landside connectors” – transportation systems such as roads and pipelines (see figure). Each year, ports are affected by natural disasters such as floods and hurricanes, which can disrupt the global supply chain.

The James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes a provision for GAO to review federal efforts to assist ports in enhancing the resilience of port infrastructure to weather-related disasters. This report describes (1) how DOT and DHS consider disaster resilience when awarding funds to ports and the extent funded projects have improved port disaster resilience; and (2) federal efforts to assist port authorities with identifying vulnerabilities and improving resilience.

To address these objectives, GAO interviewed DOT and DHS officials and representatives from two port associations and seven selected ports, including site visits to ports located in Louisiana and Mississippi. GAO selected ports based on their level of freight traffic and location. Views obtained from ports are not generalizable. In addition, GAO reviewed guidance and notices of funding opportunities for seven federal grant programs that DOT and DHS identified as relevant. GAO also reviewed federal guidance for conducting risk assessments and disaster resilience frameworks.

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March 2025

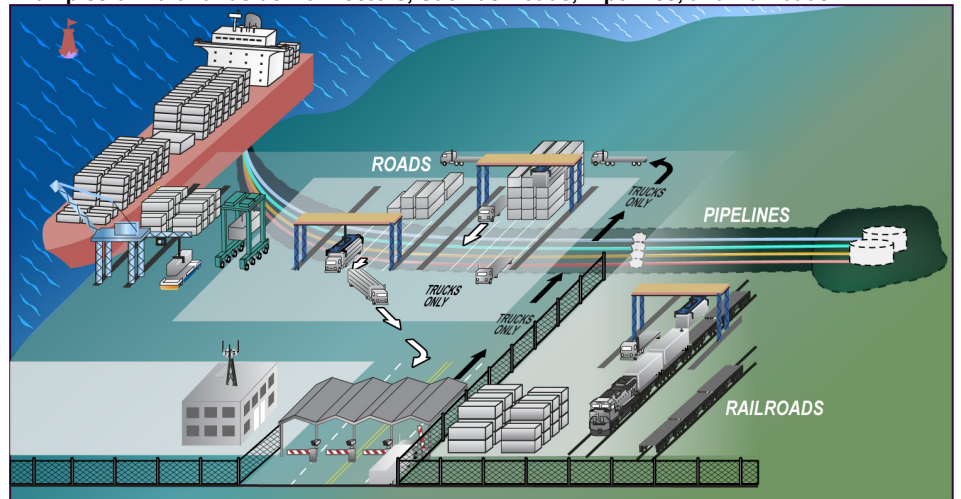
U.S. PORT INFRASTRUCTURE

DOT and DHS Offer Funding and Other Assistance Ports Can Use to Improve Disaster Resilience

What GAO Found

The Departments of Transportation (DOT) and Homeland Security (DHS) have provided funding opportunities to ports and their surrounding communities through various grants. For seven such grant programs, GAO identified grant selection criteria in 2024 related to natural disaster resilience in recent funding notices for the five competitive programs that used these types of notices. GAO found the extent that the federally awarded projects at ports improved natural disaster resilience is not fully known. According to DOT and DHS officials, a key reason for this is that port projects often result in increased resilience against natural disasters, even if they have a different primary goal such as combatting terrorism or addressing cybersecurity. For example, one of GAO’s selected ports received a grant to relocate a security checkpoint gate and install a new gate operating system. In doing so, port representatives said the gate was moved away from a flood zone, thus increasing resilience against flooding. Officials added that the statutes authorizing federal funding programs do not require the federal agencies to track whether funded projects improved disaster resilience.

Examples of Port Landside Connectors, Such as Roads, Pipelines, and Railroads



Source: GAO analysis of publicly available information and information provided by port representatives and GAO (illustrations). | GAO-25-107159

Federal agencies have developed several resilience related frameworks and risk assessment guidance that ports and stakeholders could use to identify natural disaster vulnerabilities and improve port resilience. Some guidance is for port authorities to enable them to score their port’s resilience, while other guidance is for entire communities that may include a port. Ports may choose whether to use federal guidance and tools to create risk assessments. Of the seven port authorities GAO spoke with, five had assessed and documented risks for various reasons. For example, representatives from a coastal port that is affected by hurricanes told GAO they conduct a risk assessment to identify vulnerabilities and determine operational resilience, and for insurance purposes. Representatives from another coastal port said that their plan lists operating procedures based on the severity of an earthquake, since that is their biggest natural hazard. Federal agencies have also established multiple coordination mechanisms and provide training opportunities to ports and their stakeholders that might improve resilience.