



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is an important partner in the BioWatch program and has a major role in sampling operations. We sought to answer the following questions:

- What are EPA's designated responsibilities in the BioWatch program?
- How well is EPA implementing its designated responsibilities in the BioWatch program?

Background

BioWatch is an early-warning system designed to detect the release of biological agents in the air through a comprehensive protocol of monitoring and laboratory analysis. BioWatch is a "detect to treat" network intended to detect biological agents within 36 hours of release, so that there is time for Federal, State, and local officials to determine emergency response, medical care, and consequence management needs.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional and Public Liaison at (202) 566-2391.

To view the full report, click on the following link:

www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2005/20050323-2005-P-00012.pdf

EPA Needs to Fulfill Its Designated Responsibilities to Ensure Effective BioWatch Program

What We Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) funds and oversees the BioWatch program while relying on the assistance and expertise of EPA and other agencies. DHS uses EPA to award and manage cooperative agreements to State and local air monitoring agencies to collect filter samples.

EPA's designated responsibilities include a crucial part of the BioWatch program – the sampling operations. These operations include monitor deployment, site security, oversight, and assessing monitor technology. However, we found that EPA did not provide adequate oversight of the sampling operations to ensure quality assurance guidance was adhered to, potentially affecting the quality of the samples taken. EPA completed a technology assessment of the existing BioWatch monitors, but also needs to be involved in assessing technologies that are more reliable and timely, and reduce costs. A lack of consequence management planning was highlighted when a biological agent was detected in Houston in 2003. After this incident, EPA collaborated with DHS and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on the development of consequence management plan guidance, but at the time of our review State and local consequence management planning was incomplete.

What We Recommend

EPA's Assistant Administrator for Air and Radiation should ensure that EPA fulfills all of the BioWatch-designated responsibilities, including ensuring quality assurance guidance is adhered to. Further, although not a responsibility specifically designated to EPA as part of the BioWatch program, we suggest that the Assistant Administrator for Air and Radiation have EPA work closely with the BioWatch partners to:

- use its air monitoring experience to assist DHS in identifying and testing alternative technologies that are more reliable, timely, and efficient for detecting biological agents; and
- ensure the Agency is adequately prepared to assist with consequence management plans in the event of a biological agent release.

The Agency agreed with our report and stated it has begun working with EPA regions to address many of the issues that we identified.