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## Group slams port security for shortfalls

By John Simerman  
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**OAKLAND, Calif.** - The nation's seaports remain vulnerable to attack and a lack of coordination among agencies could worsen the economic aftermath of a terrorist attack, a leading policy group says.

Inadequate federal funding and staffing has slowed or stalled a raft of security initiatives that lawmakers scurried to create after the threat to the nation's 361 ports came into focus following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, according to the study by the Public Policy Institute of California.

The federal push for better port security has also failed to recognize the importance of minimizing the economic impact of a terrorist strike.

"The only reason terrorists would attack a port is the impact on the economy," said Jon Haveman, co-editor of the report. "But if you can reduce the economic damage, the less likely they are to attack."

The report adds to a growing chorus of criticism over the federal response to the threat of nuclear, radiological, biological or chemical weapons being smuggled inside one of the millions of containers that flow into U.S. ports each year. About five percent of them are opened and inspected.

According to U.S. Coast Guard estimates, it would take about \$7.3 billion over a decade for the ports to meet the demands of the maritime security law passed in 2002. So far, a little more than \$700 million has been awarded in five rounds of port security grants.

The Inspector General of the Department of Homeland Security last year found that almost 80 percent of the grant money wasn't being spent. Some projects that received funding appeared to have little security benefit, the office reported.

A follow-up report this year found improvement, but also said "it is not clear that (Homeland Security) knows how much actual risk reduction has been achieved."

California's largest seaports, in Los Angeles, Long Beach and Oakland -- three of the nation's four busiest -- have received just 19 percent of federal port security grant funds, though they handle 40 percent of all containers coming through U.S. ports, the PPIC study found.

The Port of Oakland, the fourth busiest, has received a little more than \$11 million. It has a backlog of \$89 million in unfunded security projects, said Mike O'Brien, head of security for the port.

"We've gotten a pretty good chunk of change," said O'Brien. "We still need more."

The federal agency this year moved to a "risk-based" formula designed to grant homeland security money based more on the threat than politics.

That helps bigger ports such as Los Angeles, Long Beach and Oakland, but may leave smaller ones more vulnerable, said Susan Monteverde, vice president of government relations for the American Association of Port Authorities. It represents 86 large public ports.

"Because of limited money, they only focused on the big guys," Monteverde said. "But they are all international borders. We don't want to have a soft underbelly."

The Bush administration has placed more than 1,200 radiation detectors in the nation's ports, and ports have used federal grant money to physically secure their entries. Customs officials inspect and board ships at dozens of foreign ports, and the government has a "trusted shipper" program that allows it to focus on high-risk ships.

But a plan for background checks and identification cards for millions of port and transportation workers is far behind schedule.

Experts say physically inspecting every container would bring commerce to a crawl. Instead, the checks on most containers rely on documentation that can be manipulated or falsified. That makes a focus on response vital, said Jon Haveman, co-editor of the report.

An attack on the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach could cost as much as \$45 billion to the economy, the report estimates. "That's really an upper bound," said Haveman. "But there are a lot of things that ... can mitigate the damage."

Haveman said the federal port security program has largely ignored critical funding and planning to quickly recover from a port attack that can not be prevented.

One obstacle is a lack of a clear line of authority for emergency response. In areas such as Los Angeles, as many as 15 different agencies may have jurisdiction, the study found.

O'Brien, security chief at the Port of Oakland, said local, state and federal agencies work together on drills and exercises, and that the FBI has been designated as the lead agency if the port is attacked.

"We're talking about what-ifs and sorting out those jurisdictional issues," said O'Brien.

A House bill authored by two Californians would dedicate \$400 million a year to the port security grant program and require the Department of Homeland Security to develop specific policies and strategies for reopening ports after an attack.

One of the House members said Congress' lack of focus on recovery could lead to other ports being shut down as a precaution.

"A lot of what we did after 9/11 was to think of how we stop another attack," said Rep. Dan Lungren, R-Gold River. "We're significantly less vulnerable today than we were five years ago, but nowhere near where we need to be. ... We can't ignore the possibility there could be a successful terrorist attack."

The money would come from customs fees on shippers. The bill cleared the House on a 421 to 2 vote in May. A similar bill is being held up in the Senate.