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Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE 12 JAN 2010	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2010 to 00-00-2010			
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE CRS Issue Statement on Homeland Security Appropriations		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER			
		5b. GRANT NUMBER			
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER			
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER			
		5e. TASK NUMBER			
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 101 Independence Ave., SE, Washington, DC, 20540-7500		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER			
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)			
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)			
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified	Same as Report (SAR)	3	



CRS Issue Statement on Homeland Security Appropriations

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January 12, 2010

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

IS40579

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, launched an intense and extended examination of the nation's homeland security apparatus. One of the outcomes of this examination was the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS, the Department). DHS was designed to house under one roof the agencies responsible for major elements of the nation's homeland security effort, including aviation security and the security of other modes of transportation, immigration control and enforcement, critical infrastructure protection, emergency preparedness and response, and science and technology research for homeland security. These missions continue to be of significant focus and interest to Congress. In recent sessions, Congress has grappled with a series of specific overarching issues that complicate the debates over the annual provision of appropriations for the Department.

One overarching issue confronting appropriators is determining the appropriate allocation of resources among the nation's critical, competing homeland security mission areas. Appropriators are challenged with the difficult task of providing sufficient resources to achieve a base level of security in a volatile threat and risk environment. Appropriators must annually assess the relative importance of competing mission areas and make determinations regarding which missions will provide the most effective returns on investment. They must also evaluate how these missions fit into a broader national homeland security strategy—both between and within agencies.

One element of the debates surrounding the creation of DHS was concern over the non-homeland security (or non-terrorist-related) functions that were being incorporated into the Department. Examples of these functions include the disaster relief mission of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the maritime safety and stewardship responsibilities of the U.S. Coast Guard. Whereas the USCG retains major homeland security mission sets, after Katrina, some have questioned whether FEMA should still remain within the department. The proper allocation of resources between homeland and non-homeland security functions within the Department will continue to be a focus. FEMA's position within the Executive Branch organization may also be an issue for Congress.

The current economic downturn will further challenge appropriators. Several DHS activities are at least partially funded through offsetting fee receipts. Many of these fees are derived from charges levied on the travel, trade, and immigration transactions that occur at the nation's borders. When travel and trade decline, user-fee revenue declines, and thus less revenue is available to offset the Department's appropriation. Congress faces the possibility of having to provide additional appropriations to the Department to cover the declining fee revenue. More fundamentally, questions can be raised about the degree to which inherently governmental security functions should be fee dependent. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS), for example, is almost entirely fee funded.

The complexity of the structure of DHS, formed from several legacy and newly created agencies, further complicates the appropriators' responsibility to oversee the execution of the department's budget and evaluate its performance. This is especially difficult given the number of cross-component functions, such as intelligence, counternarcotics, and research and development activities. Funding and evaluation of these Department-wide functions will continue to be of significant concern to Congress.

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