

Actions Leading to This Study

The language of Title VII of the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 ("Terrorism Prevention Act," see Appendix D) mandates (through the Treasury Department) a study of issues related to detection, tagging, rendering inert, and licensing of explosives. The Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), which has regulatory responsibility for explosives, has in turn asked the National Research Council to assist in conducting this study,⁴ whose progress to date is reported in this interim report. (The ATF has its own task force that is also examining many of the same issues of this study. The National Research Council has been tasked with providing a totally independent assessment.)

Statement of Task

Issues to be addressed in the committee's final report include:⁵

- the viability of adding tracer elements to explosives for the purpose of detection,
- the viability of adding tracer elements to explosives for the purpose of identification,
- the feasibility and practicability of rendering inert common chemicals used to manufacture explosive materials, and
- the feasibility and practicability of imposing controls on certain precursor chemicals used to manufacture explosive materials.

The study will include analyses that address risk to human life or safety, value to law enforcement officers, effect of taggants on the quality of the explosive materials for their intended lawful use, and effects on the environment. The analyses will include cost drivers, benefits, and potential drawbacks for various technical alternatives.

In order to make sound decisions, the Treasury Department and ATF would like a thorough description of what scientific and technological options exist, including a discussion of technologies that are available, under development, or needed, as well as their potential effects on industry, law enforcement, and consumers. It would also include the identification of technical and economic obstacles that exist and further research and development activities that may be needed. While this study has a science and technology focus, the committee's final report will reflect input from all stakeholders.

⁴ In accordance with recent amendments to the language of the Terrorism Prevention Act (see Appendix D), the ATF has asked the National Research Council to form an independent panel to study the use of taggants with black and smokeless powder, which had previously been specifically excluded by legislative action. This panel will issue a separate report.

⁵ See Appendix B for a more detailed description of the statement of task.