

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-664T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Naturally-occurring infectious disease or the intentional use of a biological agent to inflict harm could have catastrophic consequences. For example, the recent outbreak of naturally-occurring highly pathogenic avian influenza affecting wild birds and poultry in the Midwest and on the Pacific coast presents a serious threat to the economy and trade, and underscores the importance of maintaining effective food and agriculture disease surveillance systems. Biosurveillance aims to detect such events as early as possible and to enhance situational awareness related to human, animal, and plant health.

Since 2010, GAO has issued a number of reports that discuss the importance of effectively conducting biosurveillance across the human, animal, and plant domains. This statement discusses prior GAO reports and the status of recommendations related to (1) federal, state, and local biosurveillance efforts, and (2) efforts related to food and agriculture disease surveillance.

This testimony is based on previous GAO products issued from 2010 through 2013 related to biosurveillance, along with selected updates conducted from November 2014 through June 2015. For these updates, GAO reviewed agency responses and documents provided in response to its recommendation follow-up efforts, such as the July 2012 *National Strategy for Biosurveillance*.

View [GAO-15-664T](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov and Steve D. Morris at (202) 512-3841 and morrisd@gao.gov.

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BIOSURVEILLANCE

Additional Planning, Oversight, and Coordination Needed to Enhance National Capability

What GAO Found

In June 2010, GAO reported that there was neither a comprehensive national strategy nor a designated focal point with the authority and resources to guide development of a national biosurveillance capability. Further, in October 2011, GAO reported that states and local agencies faced challenges in developing and maintaining their biosurveillance capabilities, such as obtaining resources for an adequate workforce, and that the federal government had not conducted an assessment of state and local jurisdictions' ability to contribute to a national biosurveillance capability. To help ensure the successful implementation of a complex, intergovernmental undertaking, GAO recommended in 2010 that the White House's Homeland Security Council direct the National Security Council Staff to develop a national biosurveillance strategy, and further recommended in 2011 that the strategy consider nonfederal capabilities. The White House issued the *National Strategy for Biosurveillance* in July 2012, which describes the U.S. government's approach to strengthening biosurveillance. However, the strategy did not fully respond to the challenges GAO identified. For example, it did not establish a framework to prioritize resource investments or address the need to leverage nonfederal resources. The White House was to issue an implementation plan within 120 days of publishing the strategy. GAO has reported that it is possible that the implementation plan could address issues previously identified, such as resource investment prioritization; however, the plan has not been released as of June 2015.

In August 2011, GAO reported that there was no centralized coordination to oversee federal agencies' efforts to implement Homeland Security Presidential Directive 9 (HSPD-9) on the nation's food and agriculture defense policy, which includes food and agriculture disease surveillance. GAO also found that the Department of Agriculture (USDA) had no department-wide strategy for implementing its HSPD-9 responsibilities. Therefore, GAO recommended that the National Security Council Staff and the Department of Homeland Security resume their efforts to coordinate and oversee implementation, and that USDA develop a department-wide strategy. In response, the National Security Council Staff began hosting interagency working group meetings, and DHS has worked to develop a report on agencies' HSPD-9 implementation efforts, which officials stated will be finalized by late summer 2015. As of February 2015, USDA had conducted a gap analysis of its HSPD-9 implementation efforts but had not yet developed a department-wide strategy. Further, GAO reported in May 2013 that USDA's Animal and Plant Inspection Service (APHIS) had broadened its previous disease-by-disease surveillance approach to an approach in which the agency monitors the overall health of livestock and poultry, but had not yet integrated this approach into an overall strategy aligned with the nation's larger biosurveillance efforts, such as efforts called for in HSPD-9. GAO recommended that APHIS integrate its new approach into an overall strategy aligned with national homeland security efforts, and develop goals and measures for the new approach. In June 2015, officials stated that APHIS has begun to develop some measures, but noted that resource constraints limit their ability to assess their new approach to disease surveillance. Fully integrating its new approach into an overall strategy aligned with broader homeland security efforts, as GAO recommended, will better position APHIS to support national efforts to address threats to animal and human health.