



Highlights of [GAO-08-686T](#), testimony before the Subcommittee on Domestic Policy, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2007, more than 150 million cattle, sheep, and other animals destined for human consumption were slaughtered in the United States. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service is responsible for enforcing the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (HMSA), which mandates that animals are handled and slaughtered humanely. GAO reported on USDA's efforts to enforce HMSA in 2004 (*Humane Methods of Slaughter Act: USDA Has Addressed Some Problems but Still Faces Enforcement Challenges*, [GAO-04-247](#)). More broadly, GAO has also issued many reports that address federal oversight of the U.S. food safety system.

This testimony focuses on (1) GAO's 2004 report on the frequency and scope of reported HMSA violations and enforcement actions by USDA, (2) information on trends in staffing and funding for USDA food inspections, and (3) information on overall federal oversight of food safety. To provide this new information, GAO analyzed personnel and funding data from USDA and the Office of Management and Budget, and interviewed USDA food safety inspection officials.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-686T](#). For more information, contact Lisa Shames at (202) 512-3841 or shamesl@gao.gov.

HUMANE METHODS OF HANDLING AND SLAUGHTER

Public Reporting on Violations Can Identify Enforcement Challenges and Enhance Transparency

What GAO Found

In January 2004, GAO reported that incomplete and inconsistent inspection records made it difficult to determine the frequency and scope of HMSA violations, inspectors did not always document violations of the act, and they did not consistently document the scope and severity of each incident. GAO also reported that enforcement actions to address noncompliance with the act were inconsistent, and that USDA was not using consistent criteria to determine when to suspend plant operations in cases of serious or repeated violations. The Congress has urged USDA to report annually on trends in compliance with humane slaughter methods. Such public reporting can enhance transparency, but USDA's most recent report was in March 2003 and relied on incomplete data. For example, that report said very few infractions were for inhumane treatment, but GAO found that at least one-fourth of the infractions were for ineffective stunning which fails to meet humane standards. USDA has taken actions to address the recommendations GAO made in 2004 about oversight of HMSA. However, GAO has not evaluated the effectiveness of these actions.

USDA faces resource challenges that may make it difficult for it to enforce HMSA and ensure the safety of the food supply. Although USDA's budget for food safety-related activities has increased since 1988, staffing for these activities has declined from its highest level in 1995. Agency officials noted the overall decline is due, in part, to consolidation in the meat industry, resulting in fewer facilities. In 2004, GAO found that USDA lacked detailed information on how much time its inspectors spend on humane handling and slaughter activities, making it difficult to determine if the number of inspectors is adequate. USDA has taken actions to address most of GAO's recommendations for assessing its resource needs for HMSA, but GAO has not evaluated these actions. Although not directly related to HMSA activities, the quantity of meat and poultry inspected and passed by USDA has grown, and the quantity of meat and poultry recalled has increased.

USDA has oversight responsibility for ensuring the safety of meat, poultry, and processed eggs. For example, federal regulations prohibit companies from processing and selling meat from disabled cows—which have a higher probability of being infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy—without explicit USDA inspector approval. However, USDA is only 1 of 15 agencies that collectively administer at least 30 laws related to food safety. This fragmentation is the key reason GAO added the federal oversight of food safety to its High-Risk Series in 2007 and called for a governmentwide reexamination of the food safety system. GAO has reported on problems with this system—including inconsistent oversight, ineffective coordination, and inefficient use of resources. Going forward, as GAO has recommended, a governmentwide, results-oriented performance plan and a reconvened President's Council on Food Safety could build a sustained focus on the safety of the nation's food supply.