

Why GAO Did This Study

The use of pesticides and fertilizers contributes to U.S. agricultural productivity and helps ensure a generally stable, plentiful, and inexpensive food supply. However, these chemicals may also harm human health, water quality, and food safety. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) collects, analyzes, and disseminates Agricultural Chemical Usage (ACU) data to meet regulatory, business, and other informational needs. In fiscal years 2007 through 2009, NASS substantially scaled back the ACU program before restoring it in 2010. GAO was asked to examine (1) what factors NASS considered in reducing the ACU program; (2) how ACU data users were affected by the temporary cutback, and their views on the data's quality and usefulness; and (3) the extent to which agricultural pesticide and fertilizer usage data are available from sources other than NASS. GAO reviewed relevant NASS documents and interviewed NASS officials as well as 25 selected ACU data users.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that NASS establish a formal mechanism to identify and consult ACU data users on an ongoing basis and that NASS identify and evaluate other publicly available agricultural chemical usage data sources to better leverage resources and reduce potential overlap. USDA agreed with GAO's recommendations and noted specific actions it will take to implement them.

View [GAO-11-37](#) or key components. For more information, contact Lisa Shames at (202) 512-3841 or shamesl@gao.gov.

AGRICULTURAL CHEMICALS

USDA Could Enhance Pesticide and Fertilizer Usage Data, Improve Outreach, and Better Leverage Resources

What GAO Found

Operating under the constraints of a continuing resolution in fiscal year 2007, NASS considered a number of factors in reducing the ACU data program. These factors included NASS's assessment that there would be no impact on the agricultural commodities market and that chemical usage data were available from other sources. However, the agency did not consult ACU data users in its decision making or gauge the potential impact of the program's cutback on users' regulatory, business, and other needs for the data. Federal guidance directs agencies managing information to consult, and consider the effects of decisions on, data users, yet NASS officials told GAO they did not formally communicate with users until the 2007 budget was finalized. NASS officials also said that they had limited information on who used ACU data and why, which hampered the agency's ability to gauge the impact of the program's reduction. The ACU data users GAO interviewed said they generally disagreed with NASS's decision factors because they perceived the factors to be irrelevant or misapplied to the ACU program.

Most users told GAO they relied on older ACU data during the program's reduction, which hindered their ability to make informed decisions because agricultural chemical use can change from year to year due to the emergence of new pests, weather variations, changing market conditions, and other factors. All 25 users also said they regard ACU data to be high quality and generally useful for their purposes, but they identified some areas for enhancing the data. Specifically, nearly all users said the ACU data would be even more useful if the data were disseminated more frequently, in greater geographic detail, or with additional data elements. Toward that end, NASS has entered into cooperative agreements with some states to provide additional ACU data, but the agency's ability to enter into such agreements may not be widely known by state agency officials due to limited outreach by NASS. In addition, ACU reports, data tools, and related resources on NASS's Web site are difficult to locate, and the online data tools are incomplete, which hampers users' ability to access and use ACU data. While NASS has several mechanisms to gather input from its data users, such as general comment forms on NASS's Web site, most users indicated these mechanisms are not effective in ensuring ACU data continue to meet their needs.

Agricultural pesticide and fertilizer usage data are also available through several state, private, and other sources. These data sources vary in their cost, geographic and crop coverage, level of detail, and other attributes. While many ACU data users reported that they rely on other sources to supplement NASS's data, nearly all emphasized that other sources do not replace ACU data. These users said, and GAO found, that NASS is the only source of publicly available data reflecting the actual application of pesticides and fertilizers on a wide array of crops on a national scale. However, NASS has not systematically identified and evaluated other publicly available data sources. As a result, the agency does not have assurance that it is fully leveraging limited government resources, maximizing efficiencies, and minimizing potential overlap in its ACU data collection.