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DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURE

Mismanagement of Nationwide
Food Consumption Survey

Statement of
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Mr. Chairmen and Members of the Subcommittees:

We are pleased to be here today to discuss our report on the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) management of the Nationwide Food Consumption Survey.¹ This report was requested by Representative George E. Brown, Jr.

USDA's decennial Nationwide Food Consumption Survey is considered an important government survey on the nutrition status of the U.S. population. The government, the academic community, and industry all depend on the survey for key information. For example, USDA uses the data on low-income households to update its basis for the Food Stamp Program's allotments.

The most recent survey, in 1987-88, was planned and supervised by USDA's Human Nutrition Information Service (HNIS) and conducted by a contractor, National Analysts. The survey comprised a "basic" sample, which was to cover at least 6,000 households of all incomes, and a low-income sample, which was to cover at least 3,600 households. Both samples were meant to be representative of the U.S. populations from which they were drawn.

As requested by Representative Brown, we examined (1) certain aspects of the methodological soundness of the 1987-88 survey and (2) the effectiveness of USDA's management of the contractor hired to conduct the survey.

In summary, we found that the 1987-88 survey was seriously flawed. Methodological problems, deviations from the survey's original design, and lax controls over the collection and processing of the survey data all raise doubts about the quality and the usefulness of the survey's results. In addition, USDA's poor handling of the contract demonstrates how a federal contract should not be managed. Its mismanagement contributed to cost overruns, a 2-year delay in completing the survey, and the failure by the contractor to complete important contract tasks.

The balance of my testimony will focus on problems we found in the collection of the survey's data and the poor management of the contract.

SURVEY DATA OF QUESTIONABLE VALUE

We found a number of data collection problems that adversely impacted the survey's results, including low household response rates, complex and lengthy questions, deviation from the planned

¹Nutrition Monitoring: Mismanagement of Nutrition Survey Has Resulted in Questionable Data (GAO/RCED-91-117, dated July 26, 1991)

survey design, lax data quality controls, and inadequate interviewer training.

The most serious problem with the survey data resulted from the low response rate for the basic sample. Only 34 percent of the households in that sample provided individual food intake data--a response rate so low that it is questionable whether the data represent the U.S. population's eating habits.

The survey's design may have contributed to the low response rate. A complex and lengthy set of questions was used to collect the food consumption information. This posed a burden for those who participated in the survey. For the average household, the interview alone took about 3 hours. For this investment of time, as well as for the additional time needed to record two remaining days of food intake, each member was paid only \$2.

The survey's design required that equal numbers of households be interviewed over the four seasons to correct for seasonal differences in eating patterns. But National Analysts did not follow this design. Consequently, there were major differences in the numbers of interviews conducted each season.

Lax controls over the collection and processing of the survey data also compromised the data's quality. For example, controls were not followed to ensure that, as the contractor required, National Analysts collected data for those who did not respond to the survey. Profiles of nonrespondents are a standard technique used to determine whether nonrespondents differ significantly from respondents. This determination is important because, if the response rate is low, as it was in this case, differences between respondents and nonrespondents would suggest that the sample was not representative of the population. In March 1991, National Analysts informed HNIS that it had lost the data on nonrespondents while moving to a new office. In a subsequent investigation of potential contracting violations, completed by GAO's Office of Special Investigations, we learned from National Analysts that, in fact, the profiles of nonrespondents were never done.

Also, because of the frequent turnover of interviewers, National Analysts did not provide the amount of training required by the contract for some of the replacements. This requirement was meant to ensure that all data were collected and processed consistently and correctly.

These problems raise doubts about the integrity of the data in the 1987-88 survey. As a result of our concerns, HNIS convened an independent panel to investigate whether the results of the survey were biased. In the words of the panel, it did "not recommend use of the data" unless users employed the greatest caution. However, since the survey's results are the only current data available on household and individual food consumption, we believe it is

important that HNIS disclose the data's limitations to those who rely on the survey. We have recommended such disclosures.

More importantly, the survey's design flaws need to be corrected before HNIS conducts another nationwide food consumption survey. We recommended that before requesting funds for another survey, USDA submit to the Congress a report demonstrating that survey instruments and procedures have been developed to reduce the burden on respondents, to increase their motivation to participate, and to meet essential data needs. We also recommended that the report describe a plan to ensure that future surveys' results are representative of the U.S. population and state the steps to be taken and the quality controls to be followed so that future surveys will not repeat the mistakes of the past.

USDA told us that it is taking action to correct many of the methodological problems we identified. For example, USDA is looking for ways to reduce the burden on respondents and is evaluating the survey instruments.

SURVEY CONTRACT POORLY MANAGED

We also reported that the contract for the 1987-88 Nationwide Food Consumption Survey was poorly managed. In part because of USDA's mismanagement, the cost of the contract grew from \$6.2 million to \$7.6 million, and completion of the contract, expected in March 1989, was delayed until April 1991.

HNIS and USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) shared responsibility for overseeing the contractor, National Analysts. The HNIS contracting officer's representative was responsible for monitoring National Analysts' performance, providing technical assistance, and notifying the FNS contracting officer about any problems. Authority to change the contract's work, costs, or completion dates and to enforce the contract's provisions rested with the FNS contracting officer.

In administering the contract, HNIS and FNS violated internal control procedures designed to protect the public's interest. In particular, the HNIS contracting officer's representative frequently exceeded his authority by directing National Analysts both to forgo certain requirements, such as a dress rehearsal to test the survey's operations, and to undertake work not specified, such as allowing 5 months of additional data collection. He did not adequately monitor the contract or relay problems to the FNS contracting officer. After we disclosed these management problems, the HNIS administrator relieved the representative of his responsibilities for this contract.

The FNS contracting officer failed to monitor the contract for an extended period of time. Besides not communicating with the

HNIS contracting officer's representative, the contracting officer did not follow up on problems discussed in National Analysts' monthly progress reports or on invoices showing that the contractor had spent 75 percent of the budget almost 1 year before the contract was to end. FNS officials currently involved with the contract cited several reasons why the contract was not closely monitored, including a heavy work load and staff inexperience.

We recommended that in contracts for future surveys, USDA ensure that existing contracting procedures are followed and that responsible officials are held accountable. USDA is taking actions to correct the contract problems. For example, USDA told us that it plans to improve its monitoring of contracts by visiting contractors weekly, by having a formal survey operations team assist the contracting officer's representative, and by assigning additional staff with in-depth contracting experience.

Mr. Chairmen and Members of the Subcommittees, that concludes my prepared statement. I will be happy to respond to questions that you might have.