

## Why GAO Did This Study

When the President created the Department of Homeland Security, he included U.S. agriculture and food industries in the list of critical infrastructures needing protection. The Secretaries of Agriculture and of Health and Human Services have publicly declared that the U.S. food supply is susceptible to deliberate contamination. GAO was asked to provide an overview of the potential vulnerabilities of the food supply and agriculture sector to deliberate contamination and to summarize four recent GAO reports that identified problems with federal oversight that could leave the nation's agriculture and food supply vulnerable to deliberate contamination.

## What GAO Recommends

The four GAO reports included recommendations to (1) the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to strengthen import checks for detecting mad cow and foot-and-mouth diseases and to address security matters at food processors; (2) FDA to strengthen enforcement of the feed ban; and (3) the Department of Homeland Security to correct security deficiencies at Plum Island. The agencies generally agreed with GAO's recommendations and have taken, or are in the process of taking, actions to address the problems GAO found.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-259T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-259T)

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# BIOTERRORISM

## A Threat to Agriculture and the Food Supply

### What GAO Found

Bioterrorism attacks could be directed at many different targets in the farm-to-table food continuum, including crops, livestock, food products in the processing and distribution chain, wholesale and retail facilities, storage facilities, transportation, and food and agriculture research laboratories. Experts believe that terrorists would attack livestock and crops if their primary intent was to cause severe economic dislocation. The U.S. agriculture sector accounts for about 13 percent of the gross domestic product and 18 percent of domestic employment. Terrorists may decide to contaminate finished food products if harm to humans was their motive.

Four recent GAO reports found gaps in federal controls for protecting agriculture and the food supply. Thus, the United States would be vulnerable to deliberate efforts to undermine its agriculture industries, deliberate tampering of food during production, and the release of deadly animal diseases, some of which also affect humans. GAO found, for example, border inspectors were not provided guidance on foot-and-mouth disease prevention activities in response to the 2001 European outbreak, inspection resources could not handle the magnitude of international passengers and cargo, and new technology used to scan shipments at a bulk mail facility was operating only part-time and in only that facility. Such careful controls over imported foods can help to prevent pathogens from contaminating U.S. cattle with devastating diseases that have struck many other countries. GAO also found that federal overseers did not have clear authority to impose requirements on food processors to ensure security at those facilities. Finally, GAO found security problems at Plum Island—a large government-operated animal disease research facility. GAO found that scientists from other countries, facility workers, and students had access to areas containing high-risk pathogens without having completed background checks and the required escorts.

Following are the four reports discussed in this testimony:

- *Foot and Mouth Disease: To Protect U.S. Livestock, USDA Must Remain Vigilant and Resolve Outstanding Issues*, U.S. General Accounting Office, GAO-02-808 (Washington, D.C.: July 26, 2002).
- *Mad Cow Disease: Improvements in the Animal Feed Ban and Other Regulatory Areas Would Strengthen U.S. Prevention Efforts*, U.S. General Accounting Office, GAO-02-183 (Washington, D.C.: January 25, 2002).
- *Food-Processing Security: Voluntary Efforts Are Under Way, but Federal Agencies Cannot Fully Assess Their Implementation*, U.S. General Accounting Office, GAO-03-342 (Washington, D.C.: February 14, 2003).
- *Combating Bioterrorism: Actions Needed to Improve Security at Plum Island Animal Disease Center*, U.S. General Accounting Office, GAO-03-847 (Washington, D.C.: September 19, 2003).