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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-449T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, FDA, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Each year, about 76 million people contract a foodborne illness in the United States; about 325,000 require hospitalization; and about 5,000 die. While the recent E. coli outbreaks highlighted the risks posed by accidental contamination, the attacks of September 11, 2001, heightened awareness that the food supply could also be vulnerable to deliberate contamination. This testimony focuses on the (1) role that GAO's high-risk series can play in raising the priority and visibility of the need to transform federal oversight of food safety, (2) fragmented nature of federal oversight of food safety, and (3) need to address federal oversight of food safety as a 21st century challenge. This work is based on previously issued reports.

## What GAO Recommends

While many of GAO's recommendations to promote the safety of the nation's food supply have been acted upon, others that are not yet addressed could help Congress and the executive branch transform the federal oversight of food safety. For example, GAO recommended that Congress enact comprehensive, uniform, and risk-based food safety legislation, and analyze alternative organizational food safety structures. GAO also recommended that the executive branch reconvene the President's Council on Food Safety to facilitate interagency coordination. Finally, the development of a governmentwide performance plan could help ensure agencies' goals are complementary.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-449T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-449T).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Lisa Shames at (202) 512-3841 or [ShamesL@gao.gov](mailto:ShamesL@gao.gov).

# FEDERAL OVERSIGHT OF FOOD SAFETY

## High-Risk Designation Can Bring Needed Attention to Fragmented System

### What GAO Found

GAO's high-risk series is intended to raise the priority and visibility of government programs that are in need of broad-based transformation to achieve greater economy, efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, and sustainability. In January 2007, as part of our regular update of this series for each new Congress, GAO designated the federal oversight of food safety as a high-risk area for the first time.

While this nation enjoys a plentiful and varied food supply that is generally considered to be safe, the federal oversight of food safety is fragmented, with 15 agencies collectively administering at least 30 laws related to food safety. The two primary agencies are the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which is responsible for the safety of meat, poultry, and processed egg products, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which is responsible for other food. In many previous reports, GAO found that this fragmented system has caused inconsistent oversight, ineffective coordination, and inefficient use of resources. For example:

- Existing statutes give agencies different regulatory and enforcement authorities. Under current law, thousands of USDA inspectors must examine all slaughtered carcasses and visit all processing facilities at least once during each operating day. However, federal law does not mandate the frequency of inspection for foods that are under FDA's jurisdiction.
- Food recalls are generally voluntary. While USDA and FDA provide guidance to companies for carrying out voluntary recalls, they do not know how promptly and completely companies carry out recalls and do not promptly verify that recalls have reached the entire distribution chain. In addition, they use procedures that may not be effective to alert consumers to a recall.
- Federal agencies are spending resources on overlapping food safety activities. USDA and FDA both inspect shipments of imported food at 18 U.S. ports of entry but do not share inspection resources at these ports.

Integrating the fragmented federal food safety system is a significant challenge for the 21st century, particularly in light of the nation's current deficit and growing structural fiscal imbalance. To help Congress review and reconsider the base of federal spending, GAO framed illustrative questions for decision makers to consider in *21st Century Challenges: Reexamining the Base of the Federal Government*. Among these questions are how agencies can integrate and share accountability for their activities on crosscutting issues and how they can adopt more innovative methods to contribute to the achievement of national outcomes. While framing these questions, GAO specifically cited the myriad of food safety programs managed across several federal agencies.