USDA has taken steps to address some of the specific performance and management challenges that GAO previously identified. However, a variety of challenges continue, including a significant expansion of the one involving security.

- **Ensuring adequate security.** USDA has taken actions when security problems are brought to its attention. However, it needs to be proactive in identifying and correcting an expanding array of weaknesses, such as a recently identified one involving biological agents at its laboratories as well as in correcting a long-standing one involving information security.

- **Improving the delivery of services to farmers.** USDA is progressing with its field office modernization effort to improve efficiency and customer service. However, it needs to complete this task on a number of fronts, including the automation of its application processes and the integration of field operations across its various agencies.

- **Enhancing the safety of the nation’s food supply.** USDA and other federal agencies responsible for food safety have implemented an inspection program intended to enhance food safety. However, because of the millions of instances of foodborne illnesses and 5,000 related deaths that occur annually, we believe the responsibilities of USDA and other agencies for ensuring the safety of the nation’s food supply need to be brought together in a single food safety agency.

- **Providing food assistance and improving program integrity.** USDA has actions underway to minimize fraud, waste, and abuse in its food assistance programs. However, it needs to reduce further the errors that occur in these programs, which, among other things, lead to significant overpayments and underpayments to benefit recipients.

- **Enhancing financial management.** USDA has achieved an unqualified opinion on its financial statements for the first time in 9 years. However, more needs to be done, especially in the Forest Service, which continues to be "high risk" due to serious financial and accounting weaknesses.

- **Improving performance accountability at the Forest Service.** The Forest Service has initiated or planned actions to address how it accounts for and reports on its operations, accomplishments, and expenditures. However, the agency has a continuing need to make significant improvements in its performance accountability.

- **Resolving discrimination complaints.** USDA has made modest progress in processing discrimination complaints. However, it has a continuing need to resolve complaints in a more timely manner.