

Highlights of [GAO-13-255](#), a report to the Chairwoman, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The USDA's principal research agencies, ARS and NIFA, play a key role in supporting agricultural science, and questions have been raised about the extent to which the two agencies may be performing duplicative research and whether the agencies collaborate in planning research. Research duplication is the inadvertent repetition of research that does not confirm or verify conclusions from prior studies. Collaborative planning involves bringing together research agencies and stakeholders to discuss priorities and roles and responsibilities. In this context, GAO was asked to assess how these agencies ensure the efficient use of their resources for research. This report examines (1) the topics ARS and NIFA focus on and the safeguards the agencies use to prevent duplication of research projects, along with any shortcomings in those safeguards, and (2) collaborative planning ARS and NIFA engaged in and how, if at all, such planning could be enhanced. GAO reviewed USDA safeguards against duplication within and between ARS and NIFA; reviewed 20 randomly selected projects; analyzed information on collaborative planning; and interviewed officials from USDA, universities, and industry.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that ARS issue guidance that project information be provided to CRIS on a quarterly basis and that ARS and NIFA enhance collaborative planning. USDA generally agreed with GAO's findings, and cited benefits for three of the four recommendations.

View [GAO-13-255](#). For more information, contact Daniel Garcia-Diaz at (202) 512-3841 or garciadiazd@gao.gov.

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AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

Two USDA Agencies Can Enhance Safeguards against Project Duplication and Strengthen Collaborative Planning

What GAO Found

The Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) generally focus on many of the same broad topics and rely on agency safeguards, as well as on the scientific community's professional norms, to prevent inadvertent duplication of research projects within and between the agencies. Shortcomings with certain agency safeguards, however, may increase the potential risk of project duplication within or between the two agencies. ARS and NIFA built in their own safeguards to help prevent project duplication, such as (1) panels of independent external scientists who review proposed projects and (2) agency requirements for staff to ensure that proposed work is relevant, including checking the Current Research Information System (CRIS)—USDA's primary system containing project-level information on its ongoing and completed research projects—for potentially duplicative research projects in both agencies. The agencies also rely on professional norms to safeguard against duplication, such as the peer review process used by scientific journals to limit the publication of unnecessarily duplicative research. Indeed, agency officials and stakeholders could not provide recent examples of duplication within or between the two agencies, and GAO's review of 20 randomly selected research projects did not identify duplicative projects. Nevertheless, GAO identified a few shortcomings that somewhat limit the utility of certain agency safeguards. First, information in CRIS about ARS projects was typically at least 6 months out-of-date when uploaded, which undermines CRIS's utility as a safeguard. ARS officials said that the agency now expects staff to provide ARS project information on a quarterly basis, but ARS has not issued guidance about this expectation. Second, NIFA directs staff to conduct a CRIS duplication check for projects that accounted for about two-thirds of the funding it awarded for competitive grants; as a result, about one-third of its competitive grants are not subject to this safeguard against duplication. NIFA recently convened a task force to study, among other issues, whether the directive to check CRIS should be extended to all competitive grants.

USDA's Chief Scientist facilitated high-level collaborative planning, particularly between ARS and NIFA, in recent years, but 20 USDA officials and stakeholders said that agency-level collaborative planning between ARS's and NIFA's national program leaders working in common topic areas could be more systematic to make the best use of limited agricultural research resources. Specifically, the Chief Scientist and her staff led several high-level planning efforts that brought together staff from the two agencies and generated key products, such as a plan that identified USDA's seven goals for implementing its science priorities and the agencies responsible for implementing these goals. Nevertheless, national program leaders at the two agencies generally do not, and are not required to, systematically hold joint meetings for seeking stakeholder input and for setting research priorities. Some systematic collaborative planning, however, has been jointly initiated by ARS and NIFA national program leaders, such as in the animal sciences area. By enhancing collaborative planning across national program areas, as the animal sciences area has, ARS and NIFA can take fuller advantage of their collective knowledge and expertise to help set their research priorities.