The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has not thoroughly evaluated the performance of each of the pilot projects over time even though the agency stated it would do so when it announced the pilot projects. For example, in 2011, USDA completed a report evaluating the pilot project at 20 young chicken plants concluding that an inspection system based on the pilot project would ensure equivalent, if not better, levels of food safety and quality than currently provided at plants not in the pilot project. However, among the limitations of its evaluation was the use of snapshots of data for two 2-year periods instead of data for the duration of the pilot project, which has been ongoing for more than a decade. In addition, USDA did not complete an evaluation on or prepare a report evaluating the pilot project at 5 young turkey plants and has no plans to do so because of the small sample size. Nevertheless, in publishing a proposed rule that includes an optional new poultry (chicken and turkey) inspection system, USDA stated that the new system was based on its experience with the pilot projects at young chicken and young turkey plants. As a result, USDA may not have assurance that its evaluation of the pilot project at young chicken plants provides the information necessary to support the proposed rule for both chickens and turkeys. However, the agency will not complete another evaluation before it issues a final rule. USDA has begun drafting a preliminary report evaluating the pilot project at young hog plants using analyses similar to those presented in the report evaluating young chicken plants, suggesting that similar limitations may apply. Agency officials stated that when USDA develops a proposed rulemaking to modify its slaughter inspection system for hogs, the agency will need to decide whether to collect additional data. Without collecting and analyzing additional data, it will be difficult for USDA to draw conclusions about whether the pilot project at young hog plants is meeting its purpose. While the pilot project is ongoing, USDA has the opportunity to collect and analyze additional information.

GAO identified strengths and weaknesses of the three pilot projects based on the views cited most frequently by 11 key stakeholder groups representing industry, labor, consumer advocacy, and animal welfare. On the basis of these views, GAO identified strengths including giving plants responsibility and flexibility for ensuring food safety and quality and allowing USDA inspectors to focus more on food safety activities. GAO identified weaknesses including that training of plant personnel assuming sorting responsibilities on the slaughter line is not required or standardized and that faster line speeds allowed under the pilot projects raise concerns about food safety and worker safety.

USDA did not disclose certain limitations in sources of information it relied on to develop the cost-benefit analysis supporting the proposed rule on modernizing poultry slaughter inspections. GAO identified three sources of information with certain limitations that were not disclosed. For example, USDA did not disclose that it gathered no cost information from young turkey plants in the pilot project. Furthermore, USDA generalized the results from 12 young chicken plants in the pilot project that responded to a 2001 cost survey to the universe of 335 young chicken and young turkey plants in the United States in 2012. As a result, stakeholders did not have complete and accurate information to inform their comments on the proposed rule and its potential impacts.