EMERGING ANIMAL DISEASES
Actions Needed to Better Position USDA to Address Future Risks

What GAO Found

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) did not take regulatory action during the initial response to the outbreaks of Swine Enteric Coronavirus Diseases (SECD) beginning in May 2013, when an outbreak was first detected, because the agency did not believe then that such action was necessary. Instead, USDA initially supported swine industry-led efforts. Without regulatory action, such as requiring reporting of infected herds, USDA had limited information about the location of the first infected herds. In addition, USDA officials acknowledged that USDA did not follow its guidance that calls for conducting epidemiological investigations at the onset of outbreaks. As a result, USDA did not conduct timely investigations of the premises with the first infected herds, and the source of disease will likely never be determined. Further, USDA does not have a process to help ensure the guidance is followed. Without such a process, USDA lacks reasonable assurance that the guidance will be followed in the future.

In June 2014, amid concerns about the spread of SECD, USDA issued a federal order requiring reporting of newly infected herds. As a result, USDA has more accurate information about the number and location of such herds, and SECD have been confirmed in 28 U.S. states, as shown below. USDA also provided funding to help manage the diseases.

To help improve its future response to SECD and other emerging animal diseases—those not known to exist in the United States or which have changed to become a threat—USDA has drafted new guidance. However, it has not defined key aspects of its response such as roles and responsibilities, which according to its strategic plan, are key components of successful collaboration to protect animal health. Without a clearly defined response to such emerging animal diseases, response efforts could be slowed.