SEAFOOD SAFETY
Status of Issues Related to Catfish Inspection

What GAO Found
In reviewing the transfer of responsibility for the inspection of catfish from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), GAO found in May 2012 that FSIS’s then-proposed catfish inspection program would further divide responsibility for overseeing seafood safety and introduce overlap at considerable cost. For example, while FSIS would be responsible for catfish, FDA would be responsible for other types of seafood, and the Department of Commerce’s National Marine Fisheries Service would provide fee-for-service inspections of some seafood-processing facilities at their request. GAO identified four areas of concern regarding the potential for overlap or inefficient use of resources if FSIS were to implement the catfish inspection program. Specifically, there could be: (1) an increase in paperwork requirements for catfish processors; (2) overlapping inspections or unnecessary inspection frequency; (3) inconsistent oversight of imported seafood; and (4) additional costs of setting up FSIS’s inspection program. In addition, FSIS identified Salmonella as the primary catfish health hazard, but a study FSIS cited in its risk assessment of Salmonella in catfish reported that the hazards from Salmonella and other bacteria in catfish were practically zero. Furthermore, GAO found that FSIS used outdated information in its risk assessment as its scientific basis for a catfish inspection program. We concluded that the FSIS catfish inspection program would likely not enhance the safety of catfish but would duplicate other federal seafood inspections at an annual cost to taxpayers of about $14 million, as estimated by FSIS.

The Agricultural Act of 2014, also known as the 2014 Farm Bill, required FSIS to coordinate with FDA to execute a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that would, among other things, ensure that inspections of catfish conducted by both agencies were not duplicative. The agencies signed the MOU in April 2014. In December 2015, FSIS issued the final regulation for the catfish inspection program as required and also significantly reduced its 2011 estimate of the program’s annual cost to the government, from about $14 million to about $2.6 million. In March 2016, FSIS assumed responsibility for inspecting domestic catfish and in April 2016 assumed responsibility for screening catfish imports.

GAO has ongoing work for the Senate Appropriations Committee examining federal oversight of seafood safety. GAO is examining how FDA and FSIS ensure the safety of imported seafood, including catfish, and any opportunities to strengthen their programs. GAO is also reviewing the coordination between FDA and FSIS and the extent to which these agencies are leveraging each other’s resources to more effectively conduct their imported seafood oversight programs.