

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-12](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Meat and poultry slaughter and processing is one of the most hazardous industries in the United States. GAO was asked to review federal efforts to help ensure meat and poultry worker safety and health.

This report (1) describes the efforts OSHA has made to help ensure worker safety and assesses any challenges to these efforts, (2) examines how OSHA and FSIS have collaborated to ensure worker safety, and (3) assesses factors that may affect OSHA and FSIS efforts to protect workers from chemical hazards. GAO analyzed OSHA inspection data from 2005—when GAO last reported on this issue—through 2016. GAO also interviewed OSHA staff in headquarters and six field offices; officials at four other federal agencies; worker advocates; and industry representatives. GAO visited four plants and interviewed workers at six sites in five states selected based on factors such as meat or poultry production.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations, including that OSHA encourage workers to disclose sensitive concerns and gather bathroom access information; OSHA and FSIS strengthen their MOU; and FSIS share worker safety information. OSHA had concerns about two of these recommendations and did not address one. FSIS expressed concerns but described planned actions to address the recommendations. GAO believes the recommendations should be fully implemented.

View [GAO-18-12](#). View a video of GAO's [review of meat and poultry worker safety](#). For more information, contact Cindy Brown Barnes at (202) 512-7215 or [brownbarnesc@gao.gov](mailto:brownbarnesc@gao.gov).

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## WORKPLACE SAFETY AND HEALTH

### Better Outreach, Collaboration, and Information Needed to Help Protect Workers at Meat and Poultry Plants

## What GAO Found

The Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) increased its annual inspections of the meat and poultry industry from 177 in 2005 to 244 in 2016. OSHA officials told GAO that this increase was related to several new enforcement programs focusing on the poultry industry, as well as new reporting requirements that prompt additional inspections. However, OSHA faces challenges identifying and addressing worker safety concerns because workers may be reluctant to contact OSHA for fear of employer retaliation, although employers are prohibited from doing so by federal law. If workers are afraid to share concerns, OSHA may not be able to identify or address conditions that endanger them. In particular, OSHA may not be aware of the scope of problems workers could face gaining timely access to bathrooms. When asked by GAO, workers in five selected states cited bathroom access as a concern and said they fear speaking up at work, where OSHA inspectors typically interview them. Taking additional steps to encourage workers to disclose sensitive concerns and gathering additional information to determine the scope of bathroom access issues could enable OSHA to better identify worker safety and health concerns.

OSHA's and the Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service's (FSIS) main vehicle for collaboration on worker safety is their 1994 memorandum of understanding (MOU), but efforts to implement and evaluate the MOU have been limited. The MOU outlines plans for collaboration, such as referrals of plant hazards to OSHA by FSIS inspectors, training of FSIS staff, and information sharing. OSHA and FSIS have taken some steps to implement the policies and procedures outlined in the MOU. However, GAO found issues with the MOU's implementation in these three areas, hampering achievement of the MOU's goals. For example, according to FSIS officials, FSIS inspectors may be reluctant to make referrals to OSHA about hazards in plants because they fear it could trigger an OSHA inspection of FSIS. Further, the agencies have not evaluated the implementation of the MOU. Evaluating the implementation of the MOU and making any needed changes would help ensure the goals of the MOU are met and further protect the safety and health of both plant workers and FSIS inspectors.

Gaps in federal efforts create challenges to protecting workers from certain chemical hazards. For example, depending on a chemical's intended use, it may not undergo a federal review of the risks it poses to worker safety and health before it is used in a plant. FSIS collects information on how to protect its inspectors from new chemicals, but it does not have a process to share this information with OSHA or plants, among others, so that plant workers can be similarly protected. By FSIS establishing a process to regularly share the worker safety information it collects, the federal government will be better positioned to use existing resources to support the safety and health of plant workers and FSIS inspectors.