

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-243](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

With budget authority of \$146 billion in fiscal year 2018, USDA employs nearly 100,000 people organized into 13 major staff offices and eight mission areas comprising 18 agencies. In a November 2017 memorandum, the Secretary of Agriculture called for establishment of a business center in each mission area to provide consolidated administrative services. The memorandum identified three policy goals for these reforms: (1) improve customer engagement, (2) maximize efficiency, and (3) improve agency collaboration.

The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 includes a provision for GAO to report on USDA's business centers. Among other things, this report examines the extent to which USDA has (1) established business centers and (2) assessed the effectiveness and impact of these business centers. GAO reviewed USDA documents and interviewed officials from USDA's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Administration, Office of Budget and Program Analysis, and eight mission areas about their efforts. GAO also interviewed representatives of USDA employee unions and USDA's external customers, such as farmers, for their perspectives on the establishment of the business centers.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that USDA establish department-level outcome-oriented performance goals and related measures for the business centers, and use them to assess the effectiveness and impact of the business center reforms. USDA agreed with the recommendation.

View [GAO-20-243](#). For more information, contact Steve Morris at (202) 512-3841 or morriss@gao.gov.

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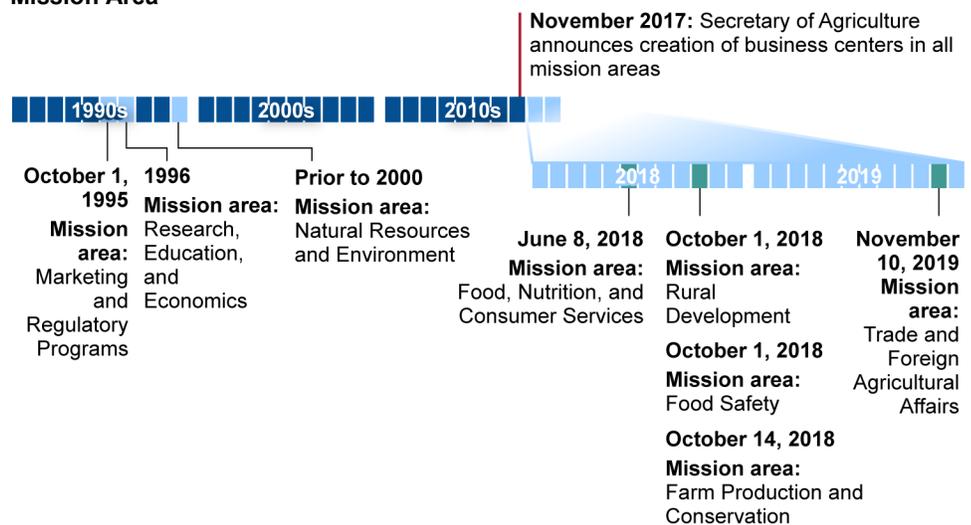
USDA ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES

More Could Be Done to Assess Effectiveness and Impact of Business Centers

What GAO Found

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has established business centers to provide consolidated administrative services such as human resources and information technology in each of its eight mission areas, in keeping with reforms called for in a November 2017 memorandum from the Secretary of Agriculture. The business centers vary in when they were established; three preceded the Secretary's memorandum (see figure). Typically, each business center is located within one of the mission area's component agencies, and the center's leader reports directly to agency leadership.

Business Centers Established at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), by Mission Area



Source: GAO analysis of USDA information. | GAO-20-243

According to a USDA official, the department regularly reviews data on administrative services, including services provided by the business centers. However, the department has not assessed the effectiveness and impact of its business centers and as of November 2019, did not plan to do so. Beginning in 2018, USDA created an online monitoring system to compile data on the status of administrative services, with "dashboards" displaying data specific to different administrative services, among other things. However, the department has not used dashboards or associated metrics to assess the effectiveness and impact of the business centers, including their impact on USDA's customer service; human resources, including hiring; and overall functionality. GAO's prior work has shown that a key practice to consider during an agency's reform efforts is establishing clear outcome-oriented goals and performance measures to assess the reform's effectiveness and impact. Developing appropriate performance goals and systematically assessing the effectiveness and impact of the business center reforms could help the department determine whether the reforms are meeting the Secretary's overarching policy goals and improving the delivery of administrative services to support the department's mission and program goals.