U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

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Accessible Version

January 22, 2026

Mr. Samuel Berry
Chief Information Officer
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Chief Information Officer Open Recommendations: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Dear Mr. Berry:

I am writing to you with respect to your role as the Chief Information Officer (CIO) for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). As an independent, non-partisan agency that works for Congress, GAO's mission is to support Congress in meeting its constitutional responsibilities and help improve the performance and ensure the accountability of the federal government. Our work includes investigating matters related to the use of public funds and evaluating programs and activities of the U.S. Government at the request of congressional committees and subcommittees, on the initiative of the Comptroller General, and as required by public laws or committee reports. Our duties include reporting our findings and recommending ways to increase economy and efficiency in government spending. The purpose of this letter is to provide an overview of the open GAO recommendations to USDA that call for the attention of the CIO.

We identified recommendations that relate to the CIO's roles and responsibilities in effectively managing IT. They include strategic planning, investment management, and information security. We have previously reported on the significance of the CIO's role in improving the government's performance in IT and related information management functions.[1] Your attention to these recommendations will help ensure the secure and effective use of IT at the department.

Currently, USDA has 17 open recommendations that call for the attention of the CIO, including one sensitive but unclassified recommendation. Each of the 17 recommendations relates to a GAO High-Risk area: (1) Ensuring the Cybersecurity of the Nation or (2) Improving IT Acquisitions and Management.[2] In addition, GAO has designated two of the 17 as priority

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[1]See for example, GAO, *Federal Chief Information Officers: Critical Actions Needed to Address Shortcomings and Challenges in Implementing Responsibilities*, GAO-18-93 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 2, 2018).

[2]GAO, *High-Risk Series: Heightened Attention Could Save Billions More and Improve Government Efficiency and Effectiveness*, GAO-25-107743 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 25, 2025).

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recommendations.[3] Fully implementing these open recommendations could significantly improve USDA's ability to deter threats and manage its critical systems, operations, and information. I have summarized selected recommendations here. See the enclosure for a full list, and additional details on the GAO recommendations, including the sensitive but unclassified recommendation.

Ensuring the Cybersecurity of the Nation. USDA needs to take additional steps to develop a privacy risk management strategy. Specifically, we recommended that USDA establish a time frame for incorporating privacy into an organization-wide risk management strategy, that should include the department's risk tolerance. Until USDA implements this recommendation, the department will have less assurance that it is managing privacy risks within acceptable thresholds.

Improving IT Acquisitions and Management. USDA needs to take additional steps to improve its IT operations, including management of its IT portfolio. For example, we recommended that USDA complete annual reviews of its IT portfolio consistent with federal requirements. Until the department implements this recommendation, it may miss opportunities to identify areas of duplication within its IT portfolio and to develop strategies to streamline operations and optimize resource allocation.

We also recommended that the department implement procedures for tracking software license usage. Implementing this recommendation will help ensure that USDA is able to leverage opportunities to reduce costs of duplicative or unnecessary software licenses.

In addition to GAO's recommendations, the USDA Inspector General also has multiple open recommendations in the area of cybersecurity. These include recommendations that relate to the department's requirements under the Federal Information Security Modernization Act of 2014.[4] It will be important to address both GAO and Inspector General recommendations.

Copies of this letter are being sent to the appropriate congressional committees and the Federal CIO. The letter will also be available at no charge on the GAO website at https://www.gao.gov. In addition, we sent a separate letter related to department-wide priority recommendations, which conveys the importance of enhancing information technology and cybersecurity, to the Secretary of Agriculture.[5] We also sent a letter on key issues related to financial management in the federal government to the USDA Deputy Chief Financial Officer.[6]

If you have any questions or would like to discuss any of the recommendations outlined in this letter, please do not hesitate to contact me at marinosn@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this letter. Our teams will continue to coordinate with your staff on addressing these 17 open recommendations that call for the attention of the CIO. I appreciate USDA's continued commitment and thank you

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[3]Priority recommendations are those that GAO believes warrant priority attention from heads of key departments or agencies. They are highlighted because, upon implementation, they may significantly improve government operations, for example, by realizing large dollar savings; eliminating mismanagement, fraud, and abuse; or making progress toward addressing a high-risk or duplication issue. Since 2015, GAO has sent letters to selected agencies to highlight the importance of implementing such recommendations.

[4]The Federal Information Security Modernization Act of 2014, Pub. L. No. 113-283, 128 Stat. 3073 (Dec. 18, 2014) largely superseded the Federal Information Security Management Act of 2002, enacted as Title III, E-Government Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-347, 116 Stat. 2899, 2946 (Dec. 17, 2002).

[5]GAO, *Priority Open Recommendations: U.S. Department of Agriculture*, GAO-25-108088 (Washington, D.C.: June 9, 2025).

[6]GAO, *U.S. Consolidated Financial Statements: Key Issues for the U.S. Department of Agriculture*, GAO-25-108151 (Washington, D.C.: July 23, 2025).

for your personal attention to these important recommendations.

Sincerely,

//SIGNED//

Nick Marinos
Managing Director
Information Technology and Cybersecurity

Enclosure

cc: Mr. Gregory Barbaccia, Federal CIO, Office of Management and Budget

Enclosure

Chief Information Officer Open Recommendations to the U.S. Department of Agriculture

This enclosure includes the sensitive and publicly available GAO recommendations to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) that call for the attention of its Chief Information Officer (CIO). We have divided these recommendations into two categories: (1) ensuring the cybersecurity of the nation and (2) improving IT acquisitions and management.

Ensuring the Cybersecurity of the Nation

Federal agencies depend on IT systems to carry out operations and process, maintain, and report essential information. The security of these systems and data is vital to protecting individual privacy and ensuring national security. Table 1 provides information on the open cybersecurity-related recommendations relevant to the USDA CIO.

Table 1: Open Chief Information Officer-related Cybersecurity Recommendations for the U.S. Department of Agriculture

GAO report number	GAO report title	Recommendation
GAO-22-105065	Privacy: Dedicated Leadership Can Improve Programs and Address Challenges	The Secretary of Agriculture should establish a time frame for incorporating privacy into an organization-wide risk management strategy that includes a determination of risk tolerance, and develop and document this strategy. (Recommendation 6)
GAO-25-107233	Homeland Security: Actions Needed to Address Longstanding Gaps in Human Resources IT	The Secretary of Agriculture should direct the department's Chief Information Officer and officials from the National Finance Center to renegotiate its agreements with the Department of Homeland Security for EmpowHR, Payroll/Personnel System, and GovTA, to allow access to security documentation for continuous monitoring activities. (Recommendation 10)

Source: GAO summary based on previously issued reports. | GAO-26-108709

Improving IT Acquisitions and Management

Federal IT investments too frequently fail to deliver capabilities in a timely, cost-effective manner. Key management challenges—such as a lack of disciplined project planning and program oversight—continue to hamper effective acquisition and management of the government's IT assets. Table 2 provides information on the open IT acquisition and management-related recommendations relevant to the USDA CIO.

Table 2: Open Chief Information Officer (CIO)-related IT Acquisition and Management Recommendations for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

GAO report number	GAO report title	Recommendation
GAO-21-512	IT Modernization: USDA Needs to Improve Oversight of Farm Production and Conservation Mission Area	The Secretary of Agriculture should ensure that the Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) directs the Business Center Chief Operating Officer to have the FPAC mission area implement the key IT workforce planning activity of developing competency and staffing requirements. (Recommendation 5)
		The Secretary of Agriculture should ensure that the Under Secretary for FPAC directs the Business Center Chief Operating Officer to have the FPAC mission area implement the key IT workforce planning activity of assessing competency and staffing needs regularly (Recommendation 6)
		The Secretary of Agriculture should ensure that the Under Secretary for FPAC directs the Business Center Chief Operating Officer to have the FPAC mission area implement the key IT workforce planning activity of assessing gaps in competencies and staffing. (Recommendation 7)
		The Secretary of Agriculture should ensure that the Under Secretary for FPAC directs the Business Center Chief Operating Officer to have the FPAC mission area implement the key IT workforce planning activity of developing strategies and plans to address gaps in competencies and staffing. (Recommendation 8)
		The Secretary of Agriculture should ensure that the Under Secretary for FPAC directs the Business Center Chief Operating Officer to have the FPAC mission area implement the key IT workforce planning activity of implementing activities that address gaps in competencies and staffing. (Recommendation 9)
		The Secretary of Agriculture should ensure that the Under Secretary for FPAC directs the Business Center Chief Operating Officer to have the FPAC mission area implement the key IT workforce planning activity of monitoring the agency's progress in addressing competency and staffing gaps. (Recommendation 10)
		The Secretary of Agriculture should ensure that the Under Secretary for FPAC directs the Business Center Chief Operating Officer to have the FPAC mission area implement the key IT workforce planning activity of reporting to agency leadership on progress in addressing competency and staffing gaps. (Recommendation 11)
		The Secretary of Agriculture should ensure that the Under Secretary for FPAC directs the Assistant CIO to have the FPAC mission area develop a strategic plan, in alignment with departmental policies and procedures, to include performance goals and measures for maximizing efficiencies and reducing IT duplication and overlap. (Recommendation 12)*
		The Secretary of Agriculture should ensure that the Under Secretary for FPAC directs the Assistant CIO to have the FPAC mission area monitor IT program performance against efficiency goals and measures documented in its plan for maximizing efficiencies and reducing IT duplication and overlap. (Recommendation 13)*

GAO report number	GAO report title	Recommendation
GAO-24-105717	Federal Software Licenses: Agencies Need to Take Action to Achieve Additional Savings	The Secretary of Agriculture should ensure that the agency tracks software licenses that are currently in use for its widely used licenses by, at a minimum, consistently implementing its procedures for tracking license usage. (Recommendation 1)
		The Secretary of Agriculture should ensure that the agency compares the inventories of software licenses that are currently in use with information on purchased licenses to identify opportunities to reduce costs and better inform investment decision-making for its widely used licenses on a regular basis. At a minimum, it should consistently implement its procedures for comparing the inventories of licenses in use to purchase records. (Recommendation 2)
GAO-24-105980	Artificial Intelligence: Agencies Have Begun Implementation but Need to Complete Key Requirements	The Secretary of Agriculture should ensure that the department (a) reviews the department's authorities related to the applications of artificial intelligence, and (b) develops and submits to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) plans to achieve consistency with the Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Applications memorandum (M-21-06). (Recommendation 8)
		The Secretary of Agriculture should ensure that the department updates its artificial intelligence use case inventory to include all the required information, at minimum, and takes steps to ensure that the data in the inventory aligns with provided instructions. (Recommendation 9)
GAO-25-107041	IT Portfolio Management: OMB and Agencies are Not Fully Addressing Selected Statutory Requirements	The Secretary of Agriculture should direct the department CIO to work with OMB to ensure that annual reviews of their IT portfolio are conducted in conjunction with the Federal CIO and the Chief Operating Officer or Deputy Secretary (or equivalent), as prescribed by the Federal Information Technology Acquisition Reform Act. (Recommendation 11)
GAO-25-107289SU[a]	Information Technology: Agencies Need to Plan for Modernizing Critical Decades-Old Legacy Systems	Recommendation 1

*Indicates a priority recommendation.

Source: GAO summary based on previously issued reports. | GAO-26-108709

[a]Due to the sensitive nature of GAO reports with report numbers ending in SU (controlled unclassified information), the recommendation language has been omitted.