Bioterrorism attacks could be directed at many different targets in the farm-to-table food continuum, including crops, livestock, food products in the processing and distribution chain, wholesale and retail facilities, storage facilities, transportation, and food and agriculture research laboratories. Experts believe that terrorists would attack livestock and crops if their primary intent was to cause severe economic dislocation. The U.S. agriculture sector accounts for about 13 percent of the gross domestic product and 18 percent of domestic employment. Terrorists may decide to contaminate finished food products if harm to humans was their motive.

Four recent GAO reports found gaps in federal controls for protecting agriculture and the food supply. Thus, the United States would be vulnerable to deliberate efforts to undermine its agriculture industries, deliberate tampering of food during production, and the release of deadly animal diseases, some of which also affect humans. GAO found, for example, border inspectors were not provided guidance on foot-and-mouth disease prevention activities in response to the 2001 European outbreak, inspection resources could not handle the magnitude of international passengers and cargo, and new technology used to scan shipments at a bulk mail facility was operating only part-time and in only that facility. Such careful controls over imported foods can help to prevent pathogens from contaminating U.S. cattle with devastating diseases that have struck many other countries. GAO also found that federal overseers did not have clear authority to impose requirements on food processors to ensure security at those facilities. Finally, GAO found security problems at Plum Island—a large government-operated animal disease research facility. GAO found that scientists from other countries, facility workers, and students had access to areas containing high-risk pathogens without having completed background checks and the required escorts.

Following are the four reports discussed in this testimony: