



Highlights of [GAO-09-178](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

Veterinarians are essential for controlling zoonotic diseases—which spread between animals and humans—such as avian influenza. Most federal veterinarians work in the Departments of Agriculture (USDA), Defense (DOD), and Health and Human Services (HHS). However, there is a growing national shortage of veterinarians. GAO determined the extent to which (1) the federal government has assessed the sufficiency of its veterinarian workforce for routine activities, (2) the federal government has identified the veterinarian workforce needed during a catastrophic event, and (3) federal and state agencies encountered veterinarian workforce challenges during four recent zoonotic outbreaks. GAO surveyed 24 federal entities about their veterinarian workforce; analyzed agency workforce, pandemic, and other plans; and interviewed federal and state officials that responded to four recent zoonotic outbreaks.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to help ensure sufficient veterinarian capacity to protect public and animal health. In commenting on a draft of this report USDA, DOD, OPM, DHS, and Interior generally agreed with our recommendations. HHS generally concurred with the report, but disagreed with a 2007 FDA Advisory Committee report GAO cited, which said that FDA's Center of Veterinary Medicine is in a state of crisis.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-178](#). For more information, contact Lisa Shames at (202) 512-3841 or [shamesl@gao.gov](mailto:shamesl@gao.gov).

# VETERINARIAN WORKFORCE

## Actions Are Needed to Ensure Sufficient Capacity for Protecting Public and Animal Health

### What GAO Found

The federal government lacks a comprehensive understanding of the sufficiency of its veterinarian workforce. More specifically, four of five component agencies GAO reviewed have assessed the sufficiency of their veterinarian workforce to perform routine activities and have identified current or future concerns. This includes USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services (APHIS), Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), and Agricultural Research Service (ARS); and DOD's Army. Current and future shortages, as well as noncompetitive salaries, were among the concerns identified by these agencies. HHS's Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not perform such assessments and did not identify any concerns. In addition, at the department level, USDA and HHS have not assessed their veterinarian workforces across their component agencies, but DOD has a process for doing so. Moreover, there is no governmentwide effort to search for shared solutions, even though 16 of the 24 federal entities that employ veterinarians raised concerns about the sufficiency of this workforce. Further exacerbating these concerns is the number of veterinarians eligible to retire in the near future. GAO's analysis revealed that 27 percent of the veterinarians at APHIS, FSIS, ARS, Army, and FDA will be eligible to retire within 3 years.

Efforts to identify the veterinarian workforce needed for a catastrophic event are insufficient. Specifically, agencies' plans lack important elements necessary for continuing essential veterinarian functions during a pandemic, such as identifying which functions must be performed on-site and how they will be carried out if absenteeism reaches 40 percent—the rate predicted at the height of the pandemic and used for planning purposes. In addition, one federal effort to prepare for the intentional introduction of a foreign animal disease is based on the unrealistic assumption that all affected animals will be slaughtered, as the United States has done for smaller outbreaks, making the resulting veterinarian workforce estimates irrelevant. A second effort lacks crucial data, including data on how the disease would spread in wildlife. If wildlife became infected, as they have in the past, response would be greatly complicated and could require more veterinarians and different expertise.

Officials from federal and state agencies involved in four recent zoonotic disease outbreaks commonly cited insufficient veterinarian capacity as a workforce challenge. However, 10 of the 17 agencies that GAO interviewed have not assessed their own veterinarian workforce's response to individual outbreaks and are thus missing opportunities to improve future responses. Moreover, none of the entities GAO reviewed has looked across outbreaks to identify common workforce challenges and possible solutions.