

Why GAO Did This Study

Through its commodity program, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides commodity foods at no cost to schools taking part in the national school meals programs. Commodities include raw ground beef, cheese, poultry, and fresh produce. Like federal food safety agencies, the commodity program has taken steps designed to reduce microbial contamination that can result in severe illness.

GAO was asked to review (1) the extent to which the program's purchasing specifications related to microbial contamination differ from federal regulations, (2) the extent to which specifications for raw ground beef differ from those imposed by some other large purchasers, and (3) examples of schools' practices to help ensure that food is not contaminated. GAO compared the program's purchasing specifications to federal regulations for food sold commercially, gathered information from seven large purchasers of ground beef, and interviewed officials in 18 school districts in five states, selected in part because of their purchasing practices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that USDA strengthen its oversight of food purchased by its commodity program, by establishing a more systematic and transparent process to determine whether additional specifications should be developed related to microbial contamination. USDA generally agreed with GAO's recommendations and provided technical comments.

View [GAO-11-376](#) or key components. For more information, contact Lisa Shames at (202) 512-3841 or shamesl@gao.gov.

SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

More Systematic Development of Specifications Could Improve the Safety of Foods Purchased through USDA's Commodity Program

What GAO Found

For 7 of the approximately 180 commodity foods offered to schools, USDA's commodity program has established purchasing specifications with respect to microbial contamination that are more stringent than the federal regulations for the same foods in the commercial marketplace. For example, the commodity program will not purchase ground beef that tests positive for *Salmonella* bacteria, while federal regulations for commercially available ground beef tolerate the presence of a certain amount of *Salmonella*. Program officials told GAO that more-stringent specifications are needed for certain foods they purchase because they go to populations, such as very young children, at a higher risk for serious complications from foodborne illnesses. However, the program has not developed more-stringent specifications for some pathogens and foods that have been associated with foodborne illness, such as raw, whole chickens cut into eight pieces that the program provides to schools. Program officials told GAO they selected products for more-stringent specifications based on their views of the safety risk associated with different types of food; developed these specifications through informal consultation with a variety of groups; and did not document the process they used.

The commodity program's purchasing specifications related to microbial contamination for raw ground beef at various processing stages are generally similar to those of some other large purchasers. The specifications used by both the commodity program and these large purchasers are more stringent than federal regulations. USDA's commodity program has several purchasing specifications related to microbial contamination for raw ground beef production, process oversight, and testing. For example, the program requires beef suppliers to take actions to reduce the level of pathogens at least twice while beef carcasses are processed. Some large purchasers of raw ground beef have purchasing specifications similar to the commodity program, although they differ in certain details. For example, of the seven large purchasers that GAO interviewed, five said they require their beef suppliers to take between two and seven actions to reduce pathogen levels on beef carcasses.

While all school districts must follow certain food safety practices to participate in federally funded school meal programs, school districts that GAO interviewed have also implemented a number of additional food safety practices. Federal regulations require school districts to develop written food safety plans and to obtain food safety inspections of their schools, among other things. In addition, some of the school districts GAO interviewed have established purchasing specifications related to microbial contamination or food safety for food they purchase in the commercial marketplace, among other things. Nevertheless, few of the district officials GAO interviewed were aware that the commodity program's purchasing specifications for seven products are more stringent than federal regulatory requirements. Officials from half of the districts GAO interviewed said that greater knowledge of these differences would affect their future purchasing decisions by enabling them to make more informed choices.