

Highlights of [GAO-11-9](#), a report to the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The United States legally imported more than 1 billion live animals from 2005 through 2008. With increased trade and travel, zoonotic diseases (transmitted between animals and humans) and animal diseases can emerge anywhere and spread rapidly. The importation of live animals is governed by five principal statutes and implemented by four agencies.

GAO was asked to examine, among other things, (1) potential gaps in the statutory and regulatory framework governing live animal imports, if any, that may allow the introduction and spread of zoonotic and animal diseases and (2) the extent to which the agencies collaborate to meet their responsibilities, and face barriers, if any, to collaboration. GAO reviewed statutes, met with agency officials, visited ports of entry, and surveyed experts on animal imports.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretaries of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, and the Interior develop a strategy to address barriers to agency collaboration that may allow potentially risky imported animals into the United States and jointly determine data needs to effectively oversee imported animals. In commenting on a draft of this report, the Departments of Agriculture, Interior and Homeland Security generally agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations. The Department of Health and Human Services provided technical comments only.

View [GAO-11-9](#) or key components. For more information, contact Lisa Shames at (202) 512-3841 or shamesl@gao.gov.

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LIVE ANIMAL IMPORTS

Agencies Need Better Collaboration to Reduce the Risk of Animal-Related Diseases

What GAO Found

The statutory and regulatory framework for live animal imports has gaps that could allow the introduction of diseases into the United States, according to the experts GAO surveyed, discussions with agency officials, and scientific studies. Specifically,

- The Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has regulations to prevent the importation of live animals that may pose a previously identified disease risk to humans for some diseases, but gaps in its regulations may allow animals presenting other zoonotic disease risks to enter the United States. CDC has solicited comments in advance of a rulemaking to better prevent the importation of animals that pose zoonotic disease risks.
- The Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has regulations to prevent imports of nonnative live animals that could become invasive. However, it has not generally emphasized preventing the introduction of disease through importation. FWS is taking some initial steps to address disease risks. For example, in January 2010, the department directed FWS to review statutory authorities and regulations to address existing problems concerning nonnative live animals and recommend tools to better prevent the introduction of new threats.

In contrast, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has regulations to prevent importing live animals it finds may pose a disease risk to agricultural animals. In 2008, APHIS issued a long-term strategy that would broaden its oversight of live animal imports.

APHIS, the Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection (CBP), CDC, and FWS have collaborated to meet their responsibilities related to live animal imports by taking actions in five areas—strategic planning, joint strategies, written procedures, leveraging resources, and sharing data. However, experts GAO surveyed and agency officials GAO interviewed identified barriers to further collaboration on live animal imports, such as different program priorities and unclear roles and responsibilities, which are inherent when multiple agencies have related responsibilities. For example, experts noted that because each of the agencies is focused on a different aspect of live animal imports, no single entity has comprehensive responsibility for the zoonotic and animal disease risks posed by live animal imports. Experts also reported the need for an entity to help the agencies overcome these barriers to collaboration. Furthermore, the agencies have largely incompatible data systems, and a completion date for CBP's planned data system, which would provide the agencies with full operational access to information on incoming shipments of live animals, has not been established. In addition, APHIS, CBP, CDC, and FWS have yet to jointly determine which data elements on live animal imports are needed in this system for them to effectively oversee these imports, according to CBP officials. As a result, it is unclear whether the data elements in the completed system will meet interagency needs.