

Why GAO Did This Study

Since 2007, federal oversight of food safety has been on GAO's list of high-risk areas, largely because of fragmentation that has caused inconsistent oversight, ineffective coordination, and inefficient use of resources. The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (Farm Bill) further fragmented the food safety system by directing FSIS to issue catfish inspection regulations. FSIS prepared a risk assessment to determine risks associated with catfish and identified *Salmonella* as the primary food safety hazard in catfish. The Farm Bill split responsibility for seafood safety between FSIS, for catfish inspection, and FDA, for seafood generally; in addition, NMFS provides fee-for-service inspections of seafood-processing facilities. GAO was asked to examine FSIS's proposed catfish inspection program.

GAO examined (1) how FSIS determined that *Salmonella* presented the primary food safety hazard in catfish and (2) the anticipated impact of FSIS's proposed catfish inspection program on other federal food safety inspection programs. GAO reviewed FSIS's proposed catfish program and related documents and interviewed officials from FSIS, FDA, and other agencies.

What GAO Recommends

Congress should consider repealing provisions of the Farm Bill assigning USDA responsibility for catfish inspection. USDA stated it is committed to completing the rulemaking process on catfish inspection consistent with the 2008 Farm Bill provisions.

View [GAO-12-411](#). For more information, contact Lisa Shames at (202) 512-3841 or shamesl@gao.gov.

SEAFOOD SAFETY

Responsibility for Inspecting Catfish Should Not Be Assigned to USDA

What GAO Found

In determining that *Salmonella* is the primary food safety hazard in catfish, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) officials stated that the agency focused on *Salmonella* at the direction of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which considered *Salmonella* the most practical hazard to evaluate. However, GAO found that FSIS used outdated and limited information in its risk assessment as its scientific basis for a catfish inspection program that seeks to mitigate that hazard. For example, FSIS identified a single outbreak of *Salmonella*-caused illnesses, but this outbreak was not clearly linked to catfish. FSIS noted that this outbreak was before the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) 1997 Seafood Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point regulations, which required firms to identify hazards in their processing systems and implement controls to prevent or mitigate these hazards; no similar outbreaks have occurred since. Other federal agencies questioned if FSIS had adequately demonstrated a *Salmonella* problem in catfish. For example, FDA does not generally have such concerns. Officials with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) also stated that FSIS did not adequately demonstrate that *Salmonella* was a problem with catfish.

With the implementation of FSIS's proposed catfish inspection program, responsibility for overseeing seafood safety would be further divided and would duplicate existing federal programs at a cost. Under FSIS's proposed program, processors would implement written sanitation and hazard control plans; FSIS would conduct continuous inspections of domestic catfish processing; and for imported catfish—which equal about 3 percent of all seafood imports—foreign countries would need to demonstrate equivalence to U.S. standards. According to FSIS, implementing this program will cost the government and industry about \$14 million annually. If FSIS's proposed program were implemented, GAO expects it would cause duplication and inefficient use of resources in several key areas. First, the program requires implementation of hazard analysis plans that are essentially the same as FDA's hazard analysis requirements. Second, if the program is implemented, as many as three agencies—FDA, FSIS, and NMFS—could inspect facilities that process both catfish and other types of seafood. Both FDA and NMFS officials stated that continuous inspection will not improve catfish safety and is counter to the use of FDA's hazard analysis requirements, in which systems are most efficiently monitored periodically rather than daily. Third, the FDA Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) gives FDA authority to establish a system to accredit third party auditors, including foreign governments, to certify imported seafood meets FDA regulatory requirements. FDA officials stated that this new authority complements FDA's existing authority to obtain assurances about the safety of seafood exports from countries with food safety systems FDA determined are comparable to the United States. Under these systems more than catfish could be covered. With FDA's new authority under FSMA, the federal government has an opportunity to enhance the safety of all imported seafood—including catfish—and avoid the duplication of effort and cost that would result from FSIS's implementation of its proposed program.