

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-744](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

USDA is responsible for ensuring the safety of poultry products. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report the U.S. food supply is one of the safest in the world, yet estimate that *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* contamination in food causes more than 2 million human illnesses per year. Poultry products contaminated with pathogens cause more deaths than any other commodity. GAO was asked to examine USDA's approach to reduce these pathogens in poultry products.

GAO's objectives were to (1) describe actions USDA has taken since 2006 to reduce *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* contamination in poultry products, (2) evaluate USDA's efforts to assess the effects of these actions on the incidence of human illnesses from *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* in poultry products, and (3) determine challenges USDA faces in reducing these pathogens in poultry products. GAO reviewed relevant regulations and documents and interviewed officials from USDA and CDC, as well as 11 industry, consumer, and government employee stakeholder groups selected based on knowledge of USDA's poultry slaughter inspections and food safety.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that USDA develop additional performance measures for *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* contamination in poultry products and ensure future guidelines for controlling *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* on farms include information on the effectiveness of each practice. USDA agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-14-744](#). For more information, contact J. Alfredo Gómez at (202) 512-3841 or [gomezj@gao.gov](mailto:gomezj@gao.gov).

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## FOOD SAFETY

### USDA Needs to Strengthen Its Approach to Protecting Human Health from Pathogens in Poultry Products

## What GAO Found

Since 2006, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has taken a number of actions to reduce contamination from *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* (disease-causing organisms, i.e., pathogens) in poultry (chicken and turkey) products. USDA's actions to reduce these pathogens include, for example, tightening existing standards limiting the allowable amount of *Salmonella* contamination in young poultry carcasses, implementing the first standards limiting *Campylobacter* contamination in young poultry carcasses in 2011, and developing an action plan detailing a priority list of actions, such as developing new enforcement strategies, to reduce *Salmonella*. More recently, in August 2014, USDA published its final rule to modernize poultry slaughter inspections, which according to the agency, will play a role in reducing *Salmonella* and other poultry pathogen contamination by allowing better use of agency resources, among other things.

To help assess the effects of these actions on the incidence of human illness from *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*, USDA conducted research on the effects of agency actions to reduce these pathogens and developed performance measures for certain poultry products to help monitor progress toward agency goals. For example, USDA developed a measure to indicate whether agency actions to ensure compliance with the standard for *Salmonella* contamination in young chicken carcasses are helping the agency achieve its goal of maximizing domestic compliance with food safety policies. However, USDA has not developed measures for *Salmonella* contamination in ground poultry or young turkey carcasses, even though standards for such contamination have been in place since 1996 and 2005, respectively, or for *Campylobacter* contamination in young poultry carcasses. USDA believes it is not appropriate to establish measures for ground poultry until the agency has revised standards, or for *Campylobacter* contamination until the agency has obtained more information on compliance levels—both of which the agency expects to do by the end of 2014. USDA officials stated that they will review the agency's strategic plan to determine what performance measures, if any, are needed. USDA does not believe a measure for young turkey carcasses is needed since historically data have shown that plants are meeting the standard but, in calendar year 2013, two plants did not meet it; USDA officials told GAO that these plants are no longer noncompliant. Without performance measures for these standards, USDA is not publicly reporting performance information and cannot assess the effects of its actions related to these standards in meeting the goal of maximizing domestic compliance with food safety policies and, ultimately, protecting public health.

GAO identified several challenges—based, in part, on the views of 11 stakeholder groups—that could hinder USDA's ability to reduce contamination in poultry products. For example, contamination of poultry products can be affected by practices on poultry farms. To help overcome this challenge, the agency developed guidelines in 2010 on practices for controlling *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* on farms, but the guidelines did not include information on the effectiveness of each of these practices, consistent with a recommendation from an agency advisory committee. USDA did not confirm that it plans to include this information in future guidelines. Without providing this information in future guidelines, USDA is not fully informing the poultry industry of the potential benefits of adopting these practices and encouraging their implementation.