

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-180](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

For more than a decade, GAO has reported on the fragmented federal food safety system. In 2007, GAO added federal oversight of food safety to its list of high-risk areas because of risks to the economy and to public health and safety.

GAO conducted this work under the authority of the Comptroller General to assist Congress with its food safety oversight responsibilities. This report examines (1) HHS and USDA implementation of GPRAMA requirements for addressing crosscutting efforts in their food safety strategic and performance planning and (2) the extent to which FDA and FSIS have a centralized mechanism in place to collaborate across federal food safety programs. GAO reviewed relevant legislation and agency documentation; analyzed responses from food safety experts; and interviewed OMB staff and officials from FDA and FSIS.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that HHS and USDA build upon their efforts to implement GPRAMA requirements to fully address crosscutting food safety efforts. Congress should consider (1) directing OMB to develop a government-wide food safety performance plan and (2) formalizing the FSWG through statute to help ensure sustained leadership across food safety agencies over time. GAO provided a draft of this report for review and comment to HHS, OMB, and USDA. HHS and USDA agreed with the recommendation. HHS, OMB, and USDA provided technical comments, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-15-180](#). For more information, contact Steve D. Morris at (202) 512-3841 or morris@gao.gov.

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FEDERAL FOOD SAFETY OVERSIGHT

Additional Actions Needed to Improve Planning and Collaboration

What GAO Found

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) have taken steps to implement GPRAMA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA) requirements but could more fully address crosscutting food safety efforts. For example, GPRAMA requires agencies to describe in their strategic and performance planning how they are working with other agencies to achieve their goals. HHS and USDA vary in the amount of detail they provide on their crosscutting food safety efforts. In addition, they do not include several relevant crosscutting efforts, such as the National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System, which tracks whether foodborne bacteria are resistant to the antibiotics used to treat and prevent illness.

Fully addressing crosscutting efforts in individual strategic and performance planning documents is an important first step toward providing a comprehensive picture of federal food safety performance. However, individual agencies' documents do not provide an integrated perspective on federal food safety performance. In 2011, GAO recommended that the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), in consultation with the federal agencies having food safety responsibilities, develop a government-wide performance plan for food safety. OMB has not acted on that recommendation. Without such a plan, Congress, program managers, and other decision makers are hampered in their ability to identify agencies and programs addressing similar missions and to set priorities, allocate resources, and restructure federal efforts, as needed, to achieve long-term goals. In addition, without such a plan, federal food safety efforts are not clear and transparent to the public. GAO continues to believe that a government-wide performance plan for food safety is necessary.

HHS's Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) have mechanisms in place to facilitate interagency coordination on food safety that focus on specific issues, but none provides for broad-based, centralized collaboration. For example, FDA and FSIS are collaborating with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention through the Interagency Food Safety Analytics Collaboration to improve estimates of foodborne illness sources. However, this and other mechanisms do not allow FDA, FSIS, and other agencies to look across their individual programs and determine how they all contribute to federal food safety goals. Nearly all the experts GAO interviewed agreed that a centralized collaborative mechanism on food safety is important to foster effective interagency collaboration and could enhance food safety oversight. The Food Safety Working Group (FSWG) served as a centralized mechanism for broad-based food safety collaboration and resulted in a number of accomplishments, including improved coordination. However, the FSWG is no longer meeting. A prior centralized mechanism for broad-based collaboration on food safety also was not sustained. Without a centralized collaborative mechanism on food safety, there is no forum for agencies to reach agreement on a set of broad-based food safety goals and objectives. Experts suggested that a centralized collaborative mechanism on food safety—like the FSWG—could provide sustained leadership across agencies over time if it were formalized in statute. Without such formalization, centralized collaborative mechanisms on food safety may continue to be short-lived.