

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-183](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

FDA has responsibility for ensuring the safety and proper labeling of more than 80 percent of the U.S. food supply, including an increased volume of imported food. Beginning in 2008, FDA established foreign offices to help prevent unsafe products from reaching U.S. borders. In 2010, GAO examined FDA's foreign offices and found that they engaged in a variety of activities relating to food safety but faced challenges due to an increasing workload and other factors. GAO was asked to follow up that report.

This study examines (1) the activities FDA foreign offices have engaged in since 2010 to help ensure the safety of imported food, (2) the extent of the foreign offices' contributions to the safety of imported food, and (3) the extent to which FDA has engaged in workforce planning for its foreign offices. GAO reviewed documentation of foreign office activities and plans, visited offices in China and Mexico, and interviewed agency officials, foreign regulators, and other stakeholders.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FDA complete an analysis to determine the annual number of foreign food inspections that is sufficient to ensure comparable safety of imported and domestic food. FDA agreed with GAO's recommendation.

View [GAO-15-183](#). For more information, contact J. Alfredo Gómez at (202) 512-3841 or gomezj@gao.gov.

January 2015

FOOD SAFETY

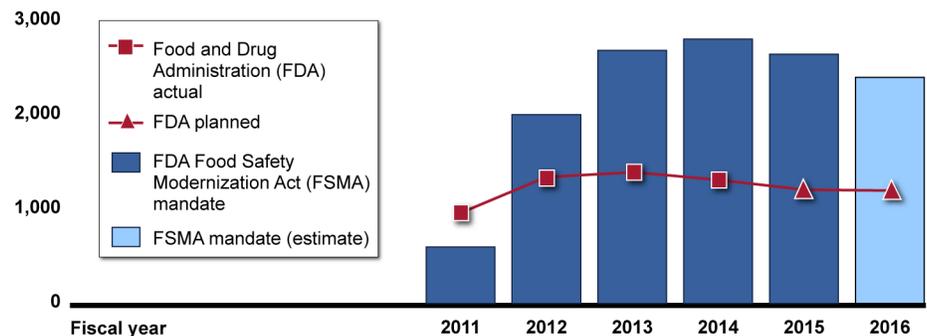
Additional Actions Needed to Help FDA's Foreign Offices Ensure Safety of Imported Food

What GAO Found

The Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) foreign offices have engaged in a variety of activities since 2010 to help ensure that imported food is safe. Foreign offices reported that building relationships with foreign counterparts and gathering and assessing information were among their top priorities. As directed by the FDA Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA), foreign offices also inspected foreign food facilities. Under FSMA, FDA is to inspect at least 600 foreign food facilities in 2011 and, for each of the next 5 years, inspect at least twice the number of facilities inspected during the previous year. As shown in the figure below, FDA is not currently keeping pace with the FSMA mandate. FDA officials told GAO that they do not plan to meet the FSMA mandate because of funding, and they question the usefulness of conducting that many inspections. However, FDA has not conducted an analysis to determine whether the number of inspections in the FSMA mandate or the lower number of inspections it is conducting is sufficient to ensure comparable safety of imported and domestic food. Without such an analysis, FDA is not in a position to know what is a sufficient number of foreign inspections and, if appropriate, request a change in the mandate.

FDA Inspections of Foreign Food Facilities Compared with FSMA Mandate

Number of inspections of foreign food facilities



Sources: GAO analysis of FDA (data) and FSMA. | GAO-15-183

FDA foreign offices cite their contributions to the safety of imported food, but the agency's performance measures do not fully capture these contributions. GAO recommended in 2010 that FDA develop performance measures that can be used to demonstrate the offices' contributions to imported food safety. This recommendation remains valid. FDA has initiated a review to determine how to better reflect the value of the foreign offices in the agency-wide performance systems. Until the offices' contributions are captured, FDA will have less information to effectively measure their progress toward meeting agency goals.

FDA has taken some steps to address recruitment challenges since GAO last reported, but it still does not have a strategic workforce plan. In 2010, GAO recommended that FDA develop such a plan for the foreign offices to help ensure that it recruits and retains staff with the necessary experience and skills. GAO continues to believe that such a plan for the foreign offices is critical to FDA's ability to address staffing challenges, especially since 44 percent of foreign office positions were vacant as of October 2014.