

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-331](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Foreign animal diseases—some of which infect people—can pose threats to the United States. USDA and DHS have been developing NBAF to conduct research on and develop countermeasures (e.g., vaccines) for such diseases, as part of a national policy to defend U.S. agriculture against terrorist attacks and other emergencies. DHS is constructing NBAF in Manhattan, Kansas.

DHS originally assumed responsibility for owning and operating NBAF. However, USDA will carry out this responsibility instead, following an executive order from 2017 to improve efficiency of government programs. Construction is expected to cost about \$1.25 billion.

GAO was asked to review issues related to development of NBAF and USDA's plans for operating it. This report examines (1) efforts to transfer ownership of NBAF from DHS to USDA and to prepare for the facility's operation and (2) USDA's efforts to collaborate with stakeholders.

GAO reviewed DHS and USDA documents and interviewed key department officials and various stakeholders. GAO also compared the departments' efforts on NBAF with selected key practices for government reforms and collaboration.

View [GAO-20-331](#). For more information, contact Steve D. Morris at (202) 512-3841 or morris@gao.gov.

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NATIONAL BIO AND AGRO-DEFENSE FACILITY

DHS and USDA Are Working to Transfer Ownership and Prepare for Operations, but Critical Steps Remain

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) have taken steps to plan for and implement the successful transfer of the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility (NBAF) from DHS to USDA for ownership and operation. (See figure.) The facility is to house state-of-the-art laboratories for research on foreign animal diseases—diseases not known to be present in the United States—that could infect U.S. livestock and, in some cases, people. The departments' steps are consistent with selected key practices for implementation of government reforms. In addition, USDA has taken steps to prepare for NBAF's operation by identifying and addressing staffing needs; these steps are consistent with other selected key practices GAO examined for strategically managing the federal workforce during a government reorganization.

However, critical steps remain to implement the transfer of ownership of NBAF to USDA and prepare for the facility's operation, and some efforts have been delayed. Critical steps include obtaining approvals to work with high-consequence pathogens such as foot-and-mouth disease, and physically transferring pathogens to the facility. DHS estimates that construction of NBAF has been delayed by at least 2.5 months because of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. USDA officials stated that, until the full effects of delays to construction are known, USDA cannot fully assess the effects on its efforts to prepare for the facility's operation. In addition, USDA's planning efforts were delayed before the pandemic for the Biologics Development Module—a laboratory at NBAF intended to enhance and expedite the transition of vaccines and other countermeasures from research to commercial viability. A November 2018 schedule called for USDA to develop the business model and operating plan for the module in 2019. Officials stated in May 2020 that USDA intends to develop the business model and operating plan by fiscal year 2020's end.

Construction Site of the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility (NBAF) as of November 2019 and an Artist's Rendering of NBAF When Complete



Source: Department of Homeland Security and NBAF Design Partnership. | GAO-20-331

USDA's efforts to date to collaborate with DHS and other key federal or industry stakeholders on NBAF have included

- meeting regularly with DHS officials to define mission and research priorities,
- developing written agreements with DHS about DHS's roles and responsibilities before and after the transfer, and
- collaborating with the intelligence community, as well as with relevant international research groups and global alliances, on an ongoing basis.

These efforts are consistent with selected key practices for interagency collaboration, such as including relevant participants and clarifying roles.

United States Government Accountability Office