

Action Needed to Address National and Biosecurity Risks Associated with Disposal of Federal Laboratory Equipment

GAO-26-107729

September 2026

A report to congressional requesters

Contact: Mary Denigan-Macauley at DeniganMacauleyM@gao.gov

What GAO Found

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) sold 1,316 pieces of unneeded laboratory equipment in fiscal years 2022 through 2025. Of that 1,316, GAO identified nine pieces of equipment—freeze dryers and mass spectrometers—that were on the Commerce Control List and sold to individuals and companies in the U.S. and Canada, some of which appeared to be resellers. These items are subject to export controls because they could be used by certain countries of concern to develop biological weapons or to gain a military advantage.

Examples of Laboratory Equipment on the Commerce Control List



Freeze dryer



Mass spectrometer

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture and Department of Health and Human Services. | GAO-26-107729

GAO found that HHS and USDA, in selling the nine pieces of equipment, did not report to the General Services Administration (GSA) that the items were on the Commerce Control List, as required by federal regulations. GAO identified two reasons: HHS's policy is silent on this requirement and GSA's property management system does not have a standard approach, such as a specific field, for agencies to report this information. Until HHS revises its policy and GSA creates a standard approach, GSA and potential recipients may not know when items are subject to export controls, risking harm to national security.

GAO also found that HHS and USDA have not assessed the biosecurity risks associated with the disposal of its laboratory equipment. These risks include nefarious actors acquiring such items to create a biological weapon or obtain sensitive information from the equipment. This is because agency efforts have focused on decontamination of laboratory equipment, among other reasons. Regularly assessing the biosecurity risks and taking steps, as needed, to mitigate risks as part of HHS's and USDA's overall risk management efforts, could better position the agencies to prevent nefarious actors from procuring federal equipment. To illustrate risks, GAO used fictitious identities, including that of a nonprofit organization, to successfully acquire four pieces of HHS and USDA laboratory equipment that experts said could pose a biosecurity risk.

Why GAO Did This Study

Each year, HHS and USDA dispose of hundreds of pieces of unneeded laboratory equipment. Some of this equipment could potentially be used for malicious purposes. GSA handles the disposal process, which includes transferring it to other federal agencies or auctioning it to the general public, among other options. Certain high-risk items are identified on the Commerce Control List and require a license to be exported to certain countries to protect national security and public health.

GAO was asked to review sales of equipment that pose a risk. This report, among other things, examines the extent to which the selected agencies (1) sold controlled laboratory equipment and did so in accordance with federal requirements, and (2) have assessed the risks associated with the sale of federal laboratory equipment.

GAO reviewed GSA data for fiscal years 2022-2025 on sales of HHS and USDA laboratory equipment. GAO also used fictitious identities to attempt to acquire federal laboratory equipment, reviewed relevant regulations, and interviewed agency officials. GAO also visited a federal laboratory being decommissioned to review how the equipment will be disposed of.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations related to the disposal of laboratory equipment, including that HHS revise its policy to require staff to identify items on the Commerce Control List; GSA develop a standard approach for identifying items on the list; and HHS and USDA assess and address the biosecurity risks of selling laboratory equipment. The agencies generally agreed with the recommendations and indicated plans to implement them.