



GAO
Accountability-Integrity-Reliability
Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-08-96T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Horticulture and Organic Agriculture, Committee on Agriculture House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

U.S. agriculture generates over \$1 trillion in economic activity annually, but concerns exist about its vulnerability to foreign pests and diseases. Under the agricultural quarantine inspection (AQI) program, passengers and cargo are inspected at U.S. ports of entry to intercept prohibited material and pests. The Homeland Security Act of 2002 transferred responsibility for inspections from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Customs and Border Protection (CBP). APHIS retained some AQI-related responsibilities, such as policy setting and training.

This testimony is based on issued GAO reports and discusses (1) steps DHS and USDA took that were intended to strengthen the AQI program, (2) views of agriculture specialists of their work experiences since the transfer, and (3) management problems. As part of these reports, GAO surveyed a representative sample of agriculture specialists on their work experiences, analyzed inspection and interception data, and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO previously recommended, in part, that DHS and USDA adopt meaningful performance measures for assessing the AQI program's effectiveness and develop a risk based staffing model. The agencies generally concurred with these recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-96T](#). For more information, contact Lisa Shames, (202) 512-3841 or shamesl@gao.gov.

AGRICULTURAL QUARANTINE INSPECTION PROGRAM

Management Problems May Increase Vulnerability of U.S. Agriculture to Foreign Pests and Diseases

What GAO Found

CBP and APHIS have taken steps intended to strengthen the AQI program since transfer of inspection responsibilities from USDA to DHS in March 2003. Specifically, CBP and APHIS have expanded the hours and developed a national standard for agriculture training; given agricultural specialists access to a computer system that is to better target inspections at ports; and established a joint review process for assessing compliance with the AQI program on a port-by-port basis. In addition, CBP has created new agricultural liaison positions at the field office level to advise regional port directors on agricultural issues. We have not assessed the implementation and effectiveness of these actions.

However, GAO's survey of CBP agriculture specialists found that many believed the agriculture inspection mission had been compromised by the transfer. Although 86 percent of agriculture specialists reported feeling very well or somewhat prepared for their duties, 59 and 60 percent of specialists answered that they were conducting fewer inspections and interceptions, respectively, of prohibited agricultural items since the transfer. When asked what is going well with respect to their work, agriculture specialists identified working relationships (18 percent), nothing (13 percent), salary and benefits (10 percent), training (10 percent), and general job satisfaction (6 percent). When asked what areas should be changed or improved, they identified working relationships (29 percent), priority given to the agriculture mission (29 percent), problems with the CBP chain of command (28 percent), training (19 percent), and inadequate equipment and supplies (17 percent). Based on private and public sector experiences with mergers, these morale issues are not unexpected because employees often worry about their place in the new organization.

CBP must address several management problems to reduce the vulnerability of U.S. agriculture to foreign pests and diseases. Specifically, as of May 2006, CBP had not used available inspection and interception data to evaluate the effectiveness of the AQI program. CBP also had not developed sufficient performance measures to manage and evaluate the AQI program. CBP's measures focused on only two pathways by which foreign pests and diseases may enter the country and pose a threat to U.S. agriculture. However, in early 2007, CBP initiated new performance measures to track interceptions of pests and quarantine materials at ports of entry. We have not assessed the effectiveness of these measures. In addition, CBP has allowed the agricultural canine program to deteriorate, including reductions in the number of canine teams and their proficiency. Lastly, CBP had not developed a risk-based staffing model for determining where to assign agriculture specialists. Without such a model, CBP did not know whether it had an appropriate number of agriculture specialists at each port. Subsequent to our review, CBP developed a model. As of mid-August 2007, CBP had 2,116 agriculture specialists on staff, compared with 3,154 specialists needed, according to the staffing model.