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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-04-247](#), a report to Congressional Requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In 1978, the Congress passed the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act to ensure that cattle, sheep, hogs, and other animals destined for human consumption are handled and slaughtered humanely. Within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is responsible for enforcing the act. Recently, the Congress took additional actions to improve FSIS enforcement. GAO reviewed (1) the frequency and scope of humane handling and slaughter violations, (2) actions to enforce compliance, and (3) the adequacy of existing resources to enforce the act.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FSIS (1) record specific information on the type and causes of violations; (2) establish additional clear, specific, and consistent criteria for districts to use when considering enforcement because of repetitive violations; (3) require that districts and inspectors clearly document the basis for enforcement that are due to repetitive violations; (4) develop a mechanism for determining the level of effort inspectors devote to the HMSA; (5) develop criteria for determining the appropriate level of inspection resources needed; and (6) assess whether that level is sufficient to effectively enforce the act. FSIS generally agreed with our findings and recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-247.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Lawrence J. Dyckman at (202) 512-3841 or dyckmanl@gao.gov.

HUMANE METHODS OF SLAUGHTER ACT

USDA Has Addressed Some Problems but Still Faces Enforcement Challenges

What GAO Found

Incomplete and inconsistent inspection records made it difficult to determine the frequency and scope of humane handling and slaughter violations. FSIS was unable to produce at least 44 of its inspection records that document violations of the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (HMSA) and implementing regulations. Also, inspectors did not always document violations of the HMSA because they may not have been aware of regulatory requirements. Further, the records that FSIS provided did not consistently document the scope and severity of each incident. USDA is taking steps to address these issues.

Enforcement actions to address noncompliance with the act and regulations were also inconsistent. For example, we found that FSIS inspectors temporarily halted stunning operations in more than half of the cases involving ineffective stunning of a single animal, but in less than half of similar cases involving multiple animals. We also found that FSIS officials may not be using consistent criteria to suspend plant operations—the enforcement action used when serious or repeated violations of the HMSA occur. As a result, plants in different FSIS districts may not be subject to comparable enforcement actions. In November 2003, FSIS issued clearer guidance to its inspectors and field personnel that should help resolve some of these problems.

FSIS lacks detailed information on how much time its inspectors spend on humane handling and slaughter activities making it difficult to determine if the number of inspectors is adequate. In general, FSIS officials believe that, with the introduction of a District Veterinary Medical Specialist at each of the agency's field offices, the current number of personnel devoted to humane handling and slaughter compliance is adequate.

Livestock Being Moved inside Slaughter Facility



Source: Food Safety and Inspection Service, USDA.