FOOD SAFETY

Selected Countries' Systems Can Offer Insights into Ensuring Import Safety and Responding to Foodborne Illness

Why GAO Did This Study

Like other nations, the United States faces growing food safety challenges resulting from at least three major trends. First, imported food makes up a growing share of the food supply. Second, consumers are increasingly eating foods that are raw or have had minimal processing and that are often associated with foodborne illness. Third, changing demographic patterns mean that more of the U.S. population is, and increasingly will be, susceptible to foodborne illness. In 2005, GAO reported on the approaches and challenges seven countries faced in reorganizing and consolidating food safety functions. Since then, the European Union (EU) has taken on a larger role in overseeing food safety within its 27 member states.

GAO was asked to describe how Canada, the EU, Germany, Ireland, Japan, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (UK) (1) ensure the safety of imported food, (2) respond to outbreaks of foodborne illness, and (3) measure the effectiveness of their reorganized food safety systems. GAO also asked experts in these countries and the EU to identify emerging food safety challenges that they expect to face over the next decade. In doing this work, GAO did not evaluate the countries' management of their food safety systems or explicitly compare their efforts with those of the United States.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on GAO-08-794. For more information, contact Lisa Shames at (202) 512-3841 or shamesl@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The countries GAO examined have a comprehensive approach to ensuring the safety of imported food. Specifically, they focus on the entire food supply chain, from "farm to table;" place primary responsibility for food safety on producers; separate risk assessment and risk management; use a risk-based inspection system; and take steps to ensure that certain food imports meet equivalent safety standards. Under the farm-to-table approach, for example, food safety laws cover every stage of the food production process, starting with how animals are raised and ending when food reaches the consumer. All countries GAO reviewed focus import inspections on the foods likeliest to pose the greatest risk. The EU, for example, requires that all imports of live animals and products of animal origin—which are considered high risk—enter the EU through approved border inspection posts.

Several of the selected countries reported that three elements of their food safety systems are critical in helping them respond to outbreaks of foodborne illness. These elements are traceback procedures, cooperative arrangements between government veterinarians and public health officials, and mandatory recall authority. In EU member states, all food must be traceable "one step forward and one step back" so industry and government can quickly track any food products to minimize harm to public health and reduce the economic impact on industry. Food and feed business operators must be able to document the names and addresses of the supplier and customer, as well as the nature of the product and date of delivery. Officials in several countries told GAO that mandatory recall authority—the legal authority to remove, or require another party to remove, a product from the market—is rarely used but is an important part of the food safety system because it is the last stop in the supply chain.

None of the selected countries had comprehensively evaluated its reorganized food safety system, although several track certain indicators, such as the number of inspections, enforcement actions, and foodborne illness. However, some countries' national audit offices (GAO's counterparts) have evaluated specific aspects of their countries' systems. For example, the UK audit office found that the country's Food Standards Agency had improved public confidence, a stated objective. The EU's Food and Veterinary Office has conducted numerous reviews of aspects of all EU countries' food safety systems and identified areas needing improvement. Most of the selected countries use proxy measures, such as public opinion surveys, to assess their effectiveness. Public opinion in several countries has improved in recent years. Countries' industry and consumer stakeholders also generally had positive views of the reorganized food safety systems.

Experts identified food safety challenges that they expect to face over the next decade. These include climate change; demographic change, with increases in elderly people and immigration; and new types of foods, such as ready-to-eat salads, that may result in more incidents of foodborne illness.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**