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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-652](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

A highly pathogenic strain of avian influenza (AI) has spread to nearly 60 countries over the past few years, killing millions of birds and more than 170 humans. Controlling the virus in poultry is key to reducing the risk of a human pandemic. The Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responsible for planning for AI outbreaks in poultry, with states' assistance. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is responsible for coordinating the federal response for certain emergencies and developing policy documents that serve as a basis for national emergency planning. GAO described the steps USDA is taking to prepare for highly pathogenic AI and identified key challenges. GAO reviewed response plans, statutes, and regulations; visited poultry operations; interviewed federal, state, and industry officials in five states that experienced outbreaks; and reviewed 19 state plans.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that USDA and DHS develop a memorandum of understanding to clarify their roles during certain emergencies, and USDA should take several steps to improve its planning and that of the states. USDA agreed with all recommendations except for the use of a memorandum of understanding to clarify roles. DHS agreed further clarification of roles is needed.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-652.

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

AVIAN INFLUENZA

USDA Has Taken Important Steps to Prepare for Outbreaks, but Better Planning Could Improve Response

What GAO Found

USDA is taking important steps to prepare for highly pathogenic AI. For example, the department has established mechanisms to prevent infected poultry (see photo) and products from being imported and has developed several surveillance programs to detect AI. In addition, USDA is developing response plans specific to highly pathogenic AI and has begun conducting exercises to test these plans. Moreover, USDA is building a National Veterinary Stockpile to maintain critical supplies, including equipment to protect responders. Finally, USDA has launched various AI research projects, including one to explore why the virus causes disease and death in some domestic poultry and wild birds but not in others.

While USDA has made important strides, incomplete planning at the federal and state levels, as well as several unresolved issues, could slow response. First, USDA is not planning for the lead coordinating role that DHS would assume if an outbreak among poultry occurred that is sufficient in scope to warrant various federal disaster declarations. GAO's prior work has shown that roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined and understood to facilitate rapid and effective decision making. Moreover, USDA response plans do not identify the capabilities needed to carry out the critical tasks associated with an outbreak scenario—that is, the entities responsible for carrying them out, the resources needed, and the provider of those resources. Furthermore, some state plans lack important components that could facilitate rapid AI containment, which is problematic because states typically lead initial response efforts. Finally, there are several unresolved issues that, absent advance consideration, could hinder response. For example, controlling an outbreak among birds raised in backyards, such as for hobby, remains particularly difficult because federal and state officials generally do not know the numbers and locations of these birds. In addition, USDA has not estimated the amount of antiviral medication that it would need during an outbreak or resolved how to provide such supplies in a timely manner. According to federal guidance, poultry workers responding to an outbreak of highly pathogenic AI should take antiviral medication to protect them from infection.

A Chicken Infected with Avian Influenza



Source: USDA.