



Highlights of [GAO-05-212](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The safety and quality of the U.S. food supply are governed by a complex system that is administered by 15 agencies. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), have primary responsibility for food safety. Many legislative proposals have been made to consolidate the U.S. food safety system, but to date no other action has been taken. Several countries have taken steps to streamline and consolidate their food safety systems. In 1999, we reported on the initial experiences of four of these countries—Canada, Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Since then, additional countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, and New Zealand, have undertaken consolidations.

This report describes the approaches and challenges these countries faced in consolidating food safety functions, including the benefits and costs cited by government officials and other stakeholders. In commenting on a draft of this report, HHS and USDA said that the countries' consolidation experiences have limited applicability to the U.S. food safety system because the countries are much smaller than the United States. The two agencies believe that they are working together effectively to ensure the safety of the food supply.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-212.

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

FOOD SAFETY

Experiences of Seven Countries in Consolidating Their Food Safety Systems

What GAO Found

In consolidating their food safety systems, the seven countries we examined—Canada, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom—varied in their approaches and the extent to which they consolidated. However, the countries' approaches were similar in one respect—each established a single agency to lead food safety management or enforcement of food safety legislation. These countries had two primary reasons for consolidating their food safety systems—public concern about the safety of the food supply and the need to improve program effectiveness and efficiency. Countries faced challenges in (1) deciding whether to place the agency within the existing health or agriculture ministry or establish it as a stand-alone agency while also determining what responsibilities the new agency would have and (2) helping employees adjust to the new agency's culture and support its priorities.

Although none of the countries has analyzed the results of its consolidation, government officials consistently stated that the net effect of their country's consolidation has been or will likely be beneficial. Officials in most countries stated their new food safety agencies incurred consolidation start-up costs. However, in each country, government officials believe that consolidation costs have been or will likely be exceeded by the benefits. These officials and food industry and consumer stakeholders cited significant qualitative improvements in the effectiveness or efficiency of their food safety systems. These improvements include less overlap in inspections, greater clarity in responsibilities, and more consistent or timely enforcement of food safety laws and regulations. In addition to these qualitative benefits, officials from three countries, Canada, Denmark, and the Netherlands, identified areas where they believe financial savings may be achieved as a result of consolidation. For example, in the Netherlands officials said that reduced duplication in food safety inspections would likely result in decreased food safety spending and that they anticipate savings from an expected 25 percent reduction in administrative and management personnel.

Although the seven countries we reviewed are much smaller than the United States, they are also high-income countries where consumers have very high expectations for food safety. Consequently, we believe that the countries' experiences in consolidating food safety systems can offer useful information to U.S. policymakers.