



Highlights of [GAO-06-132](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The livestock industry, which contributes over \$100 billion annually to the national economy, is vulnerable to foreign animal diseases that, if introduced in the United States, could cause severe economic losses. To protect against such losses, critical research and diagnostic activities are conducted at the Plum Island Animal Disease Center in New York. The Department of Agriculture (USDA) was responsible for Plum Island until June 2003, when provisions of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 transferred the facility to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Under an interagency agreement, USDA continues to work on foreign animal diseases at the island. GAO examined (1) DHS and USDA coordination of research and diagnostic activities, (2) changes in research and diagnostic priorities since the transfer, and (3) long-term objectives of joint activities at Plum Island.

What GAO Recommends

To make more effective use of limited space, GAO recommends that DHS, in consultation with USDA, pursue opportunities to shift work that does not require the unique features of Plum Island to other institutions. In commenting on a draft of this report, DHS and USDA generally agreed with the recommendation, but DHS believes it has already addressed it. We believe that more work is needed.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-132.

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.

PLUM ISLAND ANIMAL DISEASE CENTER

DHS and USDA Are Successfully Coordinating Current Work, but Long-Term Plans Are Being Assessed

What GAO Found

DHS and USDA's coordination at Plum Island Animal Disease Center has been largely successful because of the agencies' early efforts to work together to bring structure to their interactions at the island. For example, prior to the transfer, officials from DHS and USDA worked in concert to develop a written interagency agreement—effective when the island was transferred to DHS—that coordinated management activities. Subsequently, DHS and USDA created a detailed strategy to guide their joint work on foreign animal disease research and diagnostics. According to this joint strategy, DHS's role is to augment the research and diagnostic work that USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) conduct at the island.

Since the transfer, budget changes, in part, have modified overall priorities and the scope of work at the island. First, ARS narrowed its research priorities to focus its work primarily on a single foreign animal disease, foot-and-mouth disease (FMD). Traditionally one of the high-priority diseases studied at Plum Island, FMD has emerged as its top research priority because, according to officials, it poses the greatest threat of introduction because of its virulence, infectivity, and availability. Other research programs have been terminated or are proceeding at a slower pace. National experts we consulted confirmed the importance of studying FMD, but stated that it is also important to study a variety of other diseases to remain prepared. They suggested that, to free up limited space at the facility, some of the work that does not require the unique features of Plum Island could be performed elsewhere: for example, work that does not involve the use of a live virus, such as certain aspects of vaccine development. Second, while APHIS's overall priorities have not changed, diagnostic work has been curtailed. Officials said that, after the transfer, because the agency did not receive an expected budget increase, their plans to expand development of diagnostic tools for high-priority diseases were curtailed. This work is vital to rapidly identifying diseases when outbreaks occur. APHIS officials told us that the funds to support work on diagnostic tools remain insufficient. Finally, DHS has assumed responsibility for operations and maintenance at Plum Island and has established an applied research science and agricultural forensics team.

While DHS and USDA plan to continue to work together on FMD, agency officials told us that it is not prudent to speculate on long-term objectives at Plum Island, in part, because DHS has plans to replace the Plum Island Animal Disease Center with a new, modernized facility that could be located at Plum Island or elsewhere. Pending congressional approval, DHS estimates that the new facility will be fully operational by 2012.