

# National Advisory Committee on Meat and Poultry Inspection

## GAO Report on Oversight of Food Safety Activities

### Purpose

On March 30, 2005, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) published a report that documented problems resulting from the fragmented nature of the Federal food safety system and recommended fundamental restructuring to ensure the effective use of government resources.<sup>1</sup> In this report, GAO:

- (1) identified overlaps in food safety activities at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS);
- (2) analyzed the extent to which the agencies use interagency agreements to leverage resources; and
- (3) obtained the views of stakeholders.

The report makes seven recommendations designed to reduce and eliminate duplication and overlaps, leverage existing resources, and enhance coordination efforts among the principal Federal food safety agencies. Four of these recommendations relate to food safety inspection, the largest budget expenditure for food safety agencies.

The purpose of this brief is to clarify the Food Safety and Inspection Service's (FSIS) position on the GAO report..

### Discussion

GAO's recommendations for USDA/FSIS regarding inspection are related to dual jurisdiction for domestic and import inspection, foreign country equivalency evaluations, and inspectors' training. These are joint recommendations for the Secretary of Agriculture and the Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration. The GAO's inspection-related recommendations and FSIS' comments on each of these recommendations are listed below:

#### 1. Dual jurisdiction for domestic and import inspection:

##### *GAO recommendation:*

- Ensure the implementation of the interagency agreement that calls for sharing inspection- and enforcement-related information at food-processing facilities that are under the jurisdiction of both agencies.

##### *FSIS comment:*

- Dual jurisdiction establishments (DJE) comprise only a small percentage of the establishments under continuous inspection. A significant portion of DJEs are warehouses which do not require a grant of inspection from FSIS. In light of the small number of DJE establishments, and the level of resources

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<sup>1</sup> *OVERSIGHT OF FOOD SAFETY ACTIVITIES: Federal Agencies Should Pursue Opportunities to Reduce Overlap and Better Leverage Resources*, GAO-05-213, March 2005. The full report is available at <http://www.gao.gov/htext/d05213.html>.

dedicated to inspection in these facilities already, the opportunity for cost savings is quite small.

*GAO recommendation:*

- Leverage resources through use of the Public Health Security and Bio-terrorism Preparedness and Response Act of 2002 that allows FDA to enter into an agreement to commission USDA inspectors to carry out FDA's inspection responsibilities for food establishments that are under the jurisdiction of both agencies.

*FSIS Comment:*

- While the Bio-terrorism Act gave FDA the authority to commission other Federal officials to inspect FDA-regulated foods, implementing such an agreement between FSIS and FDA would require a considerable amount of planning and work. In fact, meat and poultry are exempt under this act, a point that GAO did not recognize in the report.

2. Foreign country equivalency evaluations:

*GAO recommendation:*

- FDA should consider the findings of USDA's foreign country equivalency evaluations when determining which countries to visit.

*FSIS comment:*

- FSIS shares information obtained during its foreign country equivalence determinations with other Federal agencies and posts its foreign audit reports, import/export requirements and port-of-entry procedures on the FSIS website.

3. Inspectors' training:

*GAO recommendation:*

- Examine the feasibility of establishing a joint training program for food inspectors.

*FSIS comment:*

- FSIS disagrees that it is feasible to create one unified, joint training program between FSIS and FDA covering all food safety verification activities. The courses must be customized to meet the training needs of FSIS personnel. FSIS agrees that there is merit in examining the feasibility of conducting joint training activities when workable commonalities can be found and, in fact, has actively sought ways to do that.

In summary, FSIS believes the existing regulatory framework and operations are working well. As a result, the American food supply continues to be among the safest in the world.

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