



Highlights of [GAO-09-424T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Veterinarians play an essential role in the defense against animal diseases, some of which can have serious repercussions for the health of animals, humans, and the economy. More than half of the federal veterinarians work in the Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and Health and Human Services (HHS). However, there is a growing national shortage of veterinarians.

This testimony focuses primarily on two key points as addressed in GAO's recently released report, *Veterinarian Workforce: Actions Are Needed to Ensure Sufficient Capacity for Protecting Public and Animal Health* ([GAO-09-178](#), February 4, 2009). First, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has not conducted a governmentwide effort to address current and future shortages of federal veterinarians; and, second, USDA and HHS have not assessed the sufficiency of their veterinarian workforces departmentwide. For the report, GAO, among other things, surveyed 24 federal component agencies about their veterinarian workforces. GAO also determined the extent to which the departments that employ about 96 percent of federal veterinarians, including USDA and HHS, have assessed the sufficiency of their veterinarian workforce. In addition, GAO interviewed officials of OPM to identify any initiatives it has conducted to address the sufficiency of the federal veterinarian workforce.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-424T](#). For more information, contact Lisa Shames at (202) 512-3841 or shamesl@gao.gov.

VETERINARIAN WORKFORCE

The Federal Government Lacks a Comprehensive Understanding of Its Capacity to Protect Animal and Public Health

What GAO Found

Although OPM's mission is to ensure the federal government has an effective civilian workforce, OPM has not conducted a governmentwide effort to address current and future federal veterinarian shortages. This is problematic because the majority of the 24 component agencies that employ veterinarians reported concerns to GAO about the sufficiency of their veterinarian workforces. For example, USDA's Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) has not been fully staffed over the past decade, and HHS' National Institutes of Health faces challenges recruiting veterinarians that specialize in laboratory animal medicine and pathology. Moreover, this situation is likely to become more challenging as a large number of federal veterinarians become eligible to retire in the near future. For example, 30 percent of USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) veterinarians will be eligible to retire by the end of fiscal year 2011.

USDA and HHS have not assessed the sufficiency of their veterinarian workforces departmentwide, despite the fact that their component agencies that employ mission-critical veterinarians are currently experiencing shortages or anticipating shortages in the future. As a result, USDA component agencies compete against one another for veterinarians instead of following a departmentwide strategy to balance the needs of these agencies. Specifically, APHIS is attracting veterinarians away from FSIS because the work at APHIS is more appealing, opportunities for advancement are greater, and the salaries are higher. Moreover, neither USDA nor HHS is fully aware of the status of its veterinarian workforce at its component agencies and, therefore, cannot strategically plan for future veterinarian needs. For example, senior HHS strategic workforce planning officials GAO spoke with were unaware of a 2007 report by one of its own Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advisory committees that found that FDA cannot fulfill its mission because of an insufficient scientific workforce, and that FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine is in a state of crisis.

To address these findings, GAO made numerous recommendations in its veterinarian workforce report. For example, GAO recommended that the Secretaries of Agriculture and Health and Human Services conduct departmentwide assessments of their veterinarian workforces to identify current and future workforce needs and departmentwide solutions to problems shared by its agencies. In addition, GAO recommended that the Director of the Office of Personnel Management determine, based on USDA's and HHS's departmentwide veterinarian workforce evaluations, whether a governmentwide effort is needed to address shortcomings in the sufficiency of the current and future veterinarian workforce.