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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-03-847](#), a report to the Ranking Democratic Member, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Scientists at the Plum Island Animal Disease Center are responsible for protecting the nation against animal diseases that could be accidentally or deliberately introduced into the country. Questions about the security of Plum Island arose after the 2001 terrorist attacks and when employees of the contractor hired to operate and maintain the Plum Island facilities went on strike in August 2002. GAO reviewed (1) the adequacy of security at Plum Island and (2) how well the contractor performed during the strike. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) assumed the administration of Plum Island from the Department of Agriculture (USDA) on June 1, 2003. While DHS is now responsible for Plum Island, USDA is continuing its research and diagnostic programs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS consult with USDA to correct physical security deficiencies; further limit access to pathogens; consult with other laboratories to identify ways to mitigate the inherent difficulty of securing pathogens; enhance response capabilities; reconsider risks and threats; and revise security and incident response plans as needed.

DHS agreed with the report and has started to implement our recommendations. USDA stated that the report was very useful.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-847

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

COMBATING BIOTERRORISM

Actions Needed to Improve Security at Plum Island Animal Disease Center

What GAO Found

Security at the Plum Island Animal Disease Center has improved, but fundamental concerns leave the facility vulnerable to security breaches. First, Plum Island's physical security arrangements are incomplete and limited. Second, Plum Island officials have been assuming unnecessary risks by not adequately controlling access to areas where pathogens are located. Controlling access is particularly important because pathogens are inherently difficult to secure at any facility. Although this risk may always exist, DHS could consult with other laboratories working with pathogens to learn different approaches to mitigate this risk. Third, Plum Island's security response has limitations. For example, the guard force has been armed but has not had the authority from USDA to carry firearms or make arrests. Moreover, Plum Island's incident response plan does not consider the possibility of a terrorist attack. Fourth, the risk that an adversary may try to steal pathogens is, in our opinion, higher at the Plum Island Animal Disease Center than USDA originally determined because of hostilities surrounding the strike. Also, when USDA developed its security plan for Plum Island, it did not review their defined threats with the intelligence community and local law enforcement officials to learn of possible threats—and their associated risks—relevant to the Plum Island vicinity. Although these reviews did not occur, USDA subsequently arranged to receive current intelligence information.

Despite a decline in performance from the previous rating period, USDA rated the contractor's performance as superior for the rating period during which the strike occurred.

Plum Island Animal Disease Center



Source: DHS.