



Highlights of [GAO-09-649](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Over the past few years, several food recalls, such as for beef and peanut products, have affected schools. It is especially important that recalls affecting schools be carried out efficiently and effectively because young children have a higher risk of complications from food-borne illnesses. GAO was asked to determine how federal agencies (1) notified states and schools about food recalls, (2) advised states and schools about disposal and reimbursement of recalled food, and (3) ensured that recalls were being carried out effectively. To do this, GAO reviewed and analyzed relevant documents and interviewed federal and state officials, as well as officials from 23 school districts that had experience with at least one of four recent cases involving the safety of food in the school lunch program.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that USDA improve FNS notification procedures and instructions on carrying out recalls. GAO also recommends specific steps that USDA and HHS take to improve monitoring of the effectiveness of recalls.

USDA and HHS agreed with this report's recommendations.

View [GAO-09-649](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Kay E. Brown at (202) 512-7215 or [brownke@gao.gov](mailto:brownke@gao.gov).

# SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

## Changes to Federal Agencies' Procedures Could Reduce Risk of School Children Consuming Recalled Food

### What GAO Found

Despite its efforts, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), which oversees federal school meals programs, did not always ensure that states and schools received timely and complete notification about suspect food products provided to schools through the federal commodity program. The federal commodity program provides food to schools at no cost to the schools, and accounts for 15 to 20 percent of food served in school meals. During 3 recent recalls, FNS notified states, but in only one case did it inform schools to hold and not serve suspect foods prior to an official recall of commodity products. When a videotape aired by the media showed inhumane treatment of cattle at a plant that provided beef to the commodity program, FNS told states to have schools stop serving the company's beef weeks before the official recall of commodity beef was announced. However, when the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recalled suspect peanut products and canned vegetables in two other cases, FNS did not inform states and schools to hold and not serve the companies' commodity products until the recalls were expanded to include the companies' commodity products—weeks later. FNS's initial notification to states regarding recalls did not provide complete information on the full range of products affected. Instead, states and schools continued to receive information on multiple other recalled products over time. It sometimes took states and schools a week or more to determine what additional products were subject to a recall, during which time they unknowingly served affected products.

FNS provided instructions for disposal and reimbursement of recalled products to states who, in turn, provided instructions to schools but, nonetheless, some schools experienced problems. Some schools reported to GAO problems in finding landfills that would accept large quantities of recalled products. Some schools also reported that reimbursement instructions were not clear, reimbursement was delayed for months, and that all of their expenses related to the recalls were not reimbursed.

Although both USDA's Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) and the FDA procedures direct them to conduct recall quality checks, neither included thousands of schools that had received recalled USDA-commodities products for the beef and peanut recalls because they thought FNS conducted these checks. As a result, they were unable to ensure that the recalls were being carried out effectively by schools. FNS officials said that they did not conduct any kind of systematic quality checks of schools receiving recalled commodities, because they relied on FSIS and FDA to conduct such checks. FDA did include schools in its canned vegetable recall audit checks, and some may have received recalled-commodity canned vegetables. However, because FDA does not systematically sample for schools or analyze results of the quality checks for the group, the agency cannot be assured that the recall was carried out effectively in schools.