



Highlights of [GAO-05-549T](#), a testimony to the Subcommittee on the Federal Workforce and Agency Organization, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

GAO has issued many reports documenting problems resulting from the fragmented nature of the federal food safety system—a system based on 30 primary laws. This testimony summarizes GAO's most recent work on the federal system for ensuring the safety of the U.S. food supply. It provides (1) an overview of food safety functions, (2) examples of overlapping and duplicative inspection and training activities, and (3) observations on efforts to better manage the system through interagency agreements. It also provides information on other countries' experiences with consolidation and the views of key stakeholders on possible consolidation in the United States.

What GAO Recommends

In the past, GAO has recommended that the Congress consider fundamental restructuring to ensure the effective use of scarce government resources. In the report that the Subcommittee is releasing today, GAO recognizes that, short of reorganization, other improvements can be made to help reduce overlap and duplication and to leverage existing resources. For example, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) could use existing authority to commission U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) inspections of dual jurisdiction establishments.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-549T.

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.

OVERSEEING THE U.S. FOOD SUPPLY

Steps Should Be Taken to Reduce Overlapping Federal Inspections and Related Activities

What GAO Found

USDA and FDA have primary responsibility for overseeing the safety of the U.S. food supply; the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the National Marine Fisheries Service also play key roles. In carrying out their responsibilities, these agencies spend resources on a number of overlapping activities, particularly inspection/enforcement, training, research, and rulemaking, for both domestic and imported food. For example, both USDA and FDA conduct similar inspections at 1,451 dual jurisdiction establishments—facilities that produce foods regulated by both agencies, as shown below.

To better manage the fragmented federal system, these agencies have entered into at least 71 interagency agreements—about a third of them highlight the need to reduce duplication and overlap or make efficient and effective use of resources. The agencies do not take full advantage of these agreements because they do not have adequate mechanisms for tracking them and, in some cases, do not fully implement them.

Selected industry associations, food companies, consumer groups, and academic experts disagree on the extent of overlap, on how best to improve the federal system, and on whether to consolidate food safety-related functions into a single agency. However, they agreed that laws and regulations should be modernized to more effectively and efficiently control food safety hazards.

As GAO recently reported, Canada, Denmark, Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom also had fragmented systems. These countries took steps to consolidate food safety functions—each country modified its food safety laws and established a single agency to lead food safety management or enforcement of food safety legislation.