

Why GAO Did This Study

International animal health authorities have stated that disease surveillance in livestock and poultry has as its main purpose the early detection of diseases and disease outbreaks. APHIS has worked closely with states and industry over the past decades to eradicate diseases by, for example, providing states with funding and guidance. But the disease landscape has changed, with rapid global movement of humans and animals, creating new threats. GAO was asked to review federal animal disease surveillance efforts. This report examines (1) USDA's new approach to disease surveillance in light of a changing disease landscape and challenges, if any, the agency faces with this approach and (2) the extent to which this approach is guided by a strategy with measurable goals and supports broader national biosurveillance efforts. GAO reviewed relevant presidential directives, laws, regulations, guidance, policies, documents, and strategic plans related to disease surveillance in animals; visited swine facilities; and interviewed federal, state, and industry veterinarians and other officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that as APHIS develops goals and measures for its new approach, it integrate the agency's vision into an overall strategy guiding how this approach supports national homeland security efforts to enhance the detection of biological threats. In their comments, USDA concurred with GAO's recommendation, and the Department of Homeland Security described its commitment to disease surveillance efforts.

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HOMELAND SECURITY

An Overall Strategy Is Needed to Strengthen Disease Surveillance in Livestock and Poultry

What GAO Found

Under a new approach, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has begun broadening its previous disease-by-disease approach to disease surveillance to one in which the agency monitors the overall health of livestock and poultry and uses additional sources and types of data to better detect and control new or reemerging diseases. APHIS's first effort under its new approach is to monitor the health of the nation's swine herds and identify new sources and types of data on diseases in swine, among other things. In planning documents, APHIS officials have proposed collecting data from farms where swine are raised, markets where they are sold, slaughter facilities, and veterinary diagnostic laboratories, among other sites. For example, APHIS has been monitoring for the presence of pseudorabies—a viral disease of swine that may cause respiratory illness and death—at slaughter facilities, but under the new approach, it has proposed monitoring these facilities for a range of other diseases as well. Key challenges to carrying out this new approach are how best to obtain data from producers, who are concerned that health information about their herds and flocks be kept confidential, and how to obtain health data in sufficient quantity from some animals like feral swine. Resource constraints also present a challenge, according to agency and state officials, given the recent decrease in APHIS's budget of about 14 percent for fiscal years 2008 through 2013.

APHIS has a vision for its new approach but has not integrated that vision into an overall strategy with associated goals and performance measures that are aligned with the nation's larger biosurveillance efforts. The Government Performance and Results Act, as amended, requires federal agencies to develop performance plans that include goals and performance measures. GAO has previously reported that these requirements can also serve as leading practices for planning at lower levels within agencies, such as individual divisions or programs. Developing goals and measures helps an organization balance competing priorities, particularly if resources are constrained, and helps an agency assess progress toward intended results. APHIS has developed a number of planning documents related to the agency's capabilities in disease surveillance in livestock and poultry, which acknowledge that the agency plays an important role in safeguarding public and environmental health. Goals APHIS has identified in these documents, however, focus primarily on processes or activities and do not specifically address outcomes the agency seeks to accomplish or have associated performance measures. Moreover, none of the planning documents indicate how they individually or collectively support national homeland security efforts called for in Homeland Security Presidential Directive 9, which assigns several federal agencies, including USDA, responsibility for establishing a comprehensive and coordinated surveillance system to support early detection of biological threats, including infectious diseases. Agency officials said they plan to develop goals and measures for the new approach. Without integrating its vision into an overall strategy with goals and measures aligned with broader national homeland security efforts to detect biological threats, APHIS may not be ideally positioned to support national efforts to address the next threat to animal and human health.