

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-512](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2017, USDA combined three of its agencies under the FPAC mission area to, among other things, improve customer service for farmers, ranchers, and foresters. For fiscal year 2020, FPAC reported obligating a total of \$229 million on IT investments to support its mission.

GAO was requested to review USDA's IT modernization efforts to improve customer service for farmers and ranchers. For this report, GAO examined the extent to which (1) USDA and FPAC are effectively overseeing the development of Farmers.gov; and (2) FPAC's IT workforce planning, efforts to reduce duplication and overlap, and customer service are consistent with leading practices. To do so, GAO compared key Farmers.gov documentation to USDA's IT investment oversight policies and procedures. GAO also compared departmental documentation to leading practices for IT workforce planning, duplication and overlap, and customer service. For both objectives, GAO interviewed cognizant agency officials to obtain their views and verify the information provided.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 15 recommendations to USDA to strengthen program oversight and address key IT leading practices supporting its IT modernization. USDA concurred with all recommendations and described actions it is taking to implement each of them.

View [GAO-21-512](#). For more information, contact Vijay D'Souza, 202-512-6240, dsouzav@gao.gov

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IT MODERNIZATION

USDA Needs to Improve Oversight of Farm Production and Conservation Mission Area

What GAO Found

In 2018, the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) mission area launched Farmers.gov to provide farmers, ranchers, and foresters with online self-service applications and business tools. USDA and FPAC have provided minimal oversight for Farmers.gov. Specifically, the governance boards did not conduct reviews at predefined checkpoints for Farmers.gov, as required by USDA's governance framework (see figure). This lack of oversight has allowed FPAC to proceed without developing key program documentation for Farmers.gov, such as project plans and cost and schedule estimates. Further, employee feedback on elements of Farmers.gov already deployed have raised a number of questions on the (1) usability of applications or tools that have already been deployed, and (2) risks that ongoing development efforts and software enhancements will produce deliverables that do not meet customer needs. Improving USDA oversight of Farmers.gov and developing repeatable processes that align Agile methodology to USDA's governance framework can help address these concerns and lead to enhanced service for intended customers.

Status of Required Governance Reviews and Key Documentation for the Farm Production and Conservation's Farmers.gov program, as of April 2021

Gates 1 and 2 | Initiation and investment

Required final documents:

- ✗ Project management plan
- ✗ Mission needs statement (including cost estimate)
- ✗ Project schedule (draft)

Required reviews and approvals:

- ✓ IAB review and approval
- ✗ E-Board review and approval

Gates 3, 4, and 5 | Requirements, design, development and test

Required final documents:

- ✗ Earned value management report
- ✗ Business case

Required reviews and approvals:

- ✗ IAB review and approval
- ✗ E-Board review and approval

E-Board (Executive Information Technology Investment Review Board), IAB (Integrated Advisory Board)

✗ Not completed ✓ Completed

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture and Farm Production and Conservation mission area data. | GAO-21-512

FPAC had not fully implemented key leading practices supporting IT workforce planning, duplication and overlap, and customer service that are necessary to ensure success. Specifically, FPAC had not implemented seven of eight IT workforce planning activities. Until it does, FPAC will be limited in its ability to address gaps in knowledge and skills. Further, while FPAC had several IT modernization initiatives underway as of March 2021 to maximize efficiencies and reduce IT duplication and overlap, it had not developed a mission area strategic plan that included the associated performance goals and measures to monitor IT program performance against efficiency goals. Moreover, while FPAC had actions and plans to address customer service measures and associated targets and goals, it had yet to fully implement this activity. Implementation of these key IT modernization practices would provide greater assurance that FPAC is meeting the needs of farmers, ranchers, and foresters.