

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106791](#), a report to the Secretary of Agriculture

Why GAO Did This Study

The annual reports on employment discrimination complaint data that USDA submits to Congress play an important role in congressional oversight of USDA's compliance with federal laws. For effective oversight, the data in these reports need to be accurate, clear, and complete.

As part of a larger review in response to a provision in the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018, GAO identified discrepancies in USDA's data and reporting on EEO discrimination complaints. This report is intended to bring these issues to the attention of USDA. In conducting its work, GAO compared data across the No FEAR Act, EEOC Form 462, and Farm Bill reports. GAO also reviewed USDA guidance and interviewed agency officials and representatives of the EEO database vendor.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations to USDA to improve its collection and reporting of EEO data. These recommendations include that USDA should update its EEO database, provide transparency about past errors in No FEAR Act reports, develop a quality review process for the Farm Bill reports, and add a section to those reports explaining the department's methods and analyses. USDA agreed with all six recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106791](#). For more information, contact Steve D. Morris at (202) 512-3841 or MorrisS@gao.gov.

November 2023

EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY

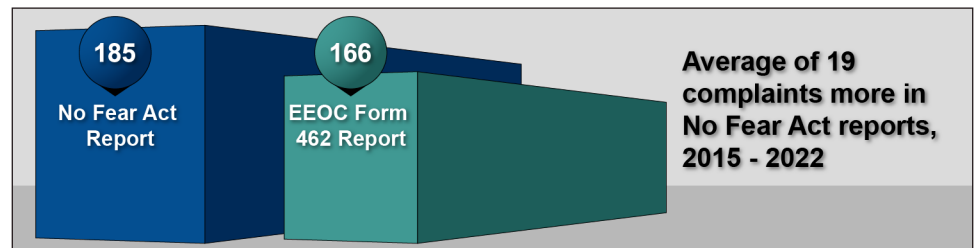
Additional Actions Would Improve USDA's Collection and Reporting of Key Data

What GAO Found

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) submits to Congress annual reports that contain information regarding equal employment opportunity (EEO) discrimination complaints made by USDA employees. GAO examined the EEO discrimination complaint data included in two types of public reports that USDA submits to Congress: the Notification and Federal Employee Antidiscrimination and Retaliation Act (No FEAR Act) reports and the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (Farm Bill) reports. GAO also examined data in the nonpublic Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Form 462 reports that USDA files with EEOC.

When examining the No FEAR Act reports and the EEOC Form 462 reports, GAO found inconsistencies in the data. For example, the reports differed on total number of complaints by basis of race (see figure). Representatives from USDA's EEO database vendor investigated and found that sometime before 2015, a database user had manually added "Hispanic/Latino" as an option for race for the No FEAR Act reports. However, "Hispanic/Latino" should be reported as national origin, according to EEOC guidance. By updating the database so that "Hispanic/Latino" only appears on the list of options for complaints by the basis of national origin, USDA will better ensure its No FEAR Act reports are accurate and in line with EEOC guidance. Furthermore, by disclosing this error on its website for past reports, USDA will better ensure the information it publishes is transparent.

USDA's Average Number of Complaints by Race Basis per Year, Fiscal Years 2015-2022



Source: GAO analysis. | GAO-24-106791

GAO also found errors, incomplete source information, and unexplained changes in sources regarding the EEO discrimination complaint data included in some of USDA's Farm Bill reports. For example, USDA's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR) changed a source for its analysis of per capita complaints but did not explain the change in the affected reports. Additionally, none of the Farm Bill reports GAO reviewed included an explanation of the methods OASCR used to conduct the analyses in these reports. OASCR also does not have a staff-level review process in which someone independent from the work itself verifies that key facts, figures, and findings in the reports align with the sources and are correct. By including a section in USDA's Farm Bill reports that explains the methods OASCR staff used to analyze EEO discrimination complaints and implementing a process to review the quality of information, as called for in USDA guidance, OASCR would better ensure the transparency, accuracy, clarity, and completeness of information in its reports.