INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Agriculture Needs to Strengthen Management Practices for Stabilizing and Modernizing Its Farm Program Delivery Systems

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has experienced significant problems with its information technology systems that support the delivery of benefits programs to farmers. In October 2006, these systems began experiencing considerable delays while attempting to process a large number of transactions, and by January 2007, the systems became inoperable for 1 month. In response to these issues, USDA developed a near-term stabilization plan and long-term plans to modernize its delivery of these programs. GAO was asked to determine (1) the extent to which USDA's stabilization plan addresses key management issues, including consistently tracking reported problems, establishing performance metrics and goals, and defining roles and responsibilities and (2) the adequacy of USDA's assessment of existing product capabilities, as well as cost and schedule estimates for its new, long-term modernization investment. To address these objectives, GAO, among other things, compared USDA's plans with industry best practices. On March 25, 2008, GAO briefed the requesters' staff on the results of this review.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that USDA develop specific plans to address management weaknesses and develop reliable cost and schedule estimates. USDA officials did not provide comments on a draft of this report; however, in commenting on the draft briefing, they generally agreed with the recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on GAO-08-657. For more information, contact Linda D. Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or koontzl@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

USDA's near-term plan to stabilize the agency's farm program delivery systems focused on technical issues such as expanding telecommunication capacity and acquiring a means for disaster backup and recovery; however, it did not address key managerial issues such as the department's inconsistent tracking of users' reported problems with the system. Additionally, USDA did not have system performance goals or dedicated staff to analyze and use system performance data, and the stabilization plan did not address these issues. Moreover, the plan did not clearly define the roles and responsibilities for the organizations involved in the stabilization effort in order to ensure proper accountability. While department officials indicated that they planned to address system performance management issues in a future version of the stabilization plan, they did not yet have plans to enable USDA to consistently track users' reported problems and to clarify roles and responsibilities. As a result, USDA could not be assured that its stabilization efforts would enable the department to reliably deliver farm benefit programs to its customers.

Regarding USDA's proposed long-term investment known as MIDAS— Modernize and Innovate the Delivery of Agricultural Systems—officials had plans under way to obtain the necessary information for assessing the capability of products to integrate existing systems. However, business requirements were not used as a basis for the department's life-cycle cost estimate of $455 million for the modernization initiative. Instead, the estimate was based primarily on the cost estimate for another unrelated USDA IT investment. Similarly, the department had not adequately assessed its schedule estimate. According to department officials, they committed to accelerating the implementation of MIDAS from 10 years to 2 years in order to more quickly deliver a long-term solution to problems the department is experiencing with its existing program's delivery systems. However, business requirements were not considered when developing this schedule estimate. As a result, it was uncertain whether the department would be able to deliver the modernization initiative within the cost and schedule time frames it had proposed.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**