

Highlights of [GAO-10-203](#), a report to congressional requesters

HUMANE METHODS OF SLAUGHTER ACT

Actions Are Needed to Strengthen Enforcement

Why GAO Did This Study

Concerns about the humane handling and slaughter of livestock have grown; for example, a 2009 video showed employees at a Vermont slaughter plant skinning and decapitating conscious 1-week old veal calves. The Humane Methods of Slaughter Act of 1978, as amended (HMSA) prohibits the inhumane treatment of livestock in connection with slaughter and requires that animals be rendered insensible to pain before being slaughtered. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is responsible for HMSA.

GAO was asked to (1) evaluate FSIS's efforts to enforce HMSA, (2) identify the extent to which FSIS tracks recent trends in resources for HMSA enforcement, and (3) evaluate FSIS's efforts to develop a strategy to guide HMSA enforcement. Among other things, GAO received survey responses from inspectors at 235 plants and examined a sample of FSIS noncompliance reports and suspension data for fiscal years 2005 through 2009.

What GAO Recommends

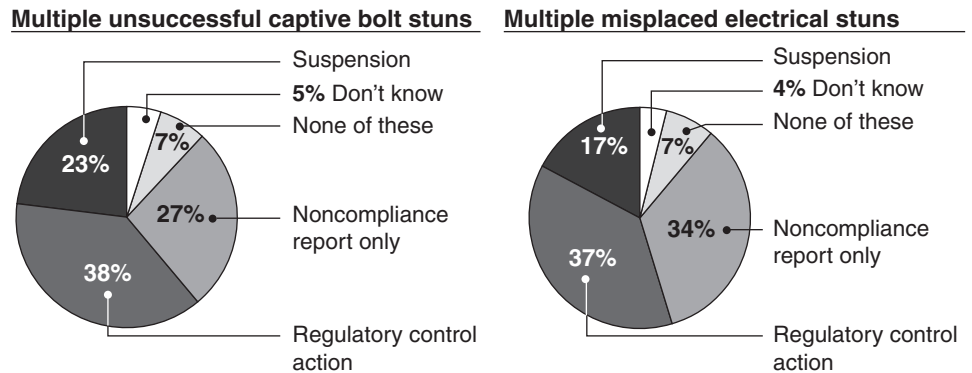
GAO is making recommendations to strengthen HMSA enforcement by, for example, establishing specific guidance on actions to take for HMSA violations. In commenting on a draft of this report, USDA did not state whether it agreed or disagreed with GAO's findings or recommendations. However, it stated that it plans to use them in improving efforts to enforce HMSA.

View [GAO-10-203](#) or [key components](#). To view survey results online click on [GAO-10-244SP](#). For more information, contact Lisa Shames at (202) 512-3841 or shamesl@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

GAO's survey results and analysis of FSIS data suggest that inspectors have not taken consistent actions to enforce HMSA. Survey results indicate differences in the enforcement actions that inspectors would take when faced with a humane handling violation, such as when an animal was not rendered insensible through an acceptable stunning procedure by forcefully striking the animal on the forehead with a bolt gun or properly placing electrical shocks. Specifically, as shown below, 23 percent of inspectors reported they would suspend operations for multiple unsuccessful stuns with a captive bolt gun whereas 27 percent reported that they would submit a noncompliance report. GAO's review of noncompliance reports also identified incidents in which inspectors did not suspend plant operations or take regulatory actions when they appeared warranted. The lack of consistency in enforcement may be due in part to the lack of clarity in current FSIS guidance and inadequate training. The guidance does not clearly indicate when certain enforcement actions should be taken for an egregious act—one that is cruel to animals or a condition that is ignored and leads to the harming of animals. A noted humane handling expert has stated that FSIS inspectors need clear directives to improve consistency of HMSA enforcement. According to GAO's survey, FSIS's training may be insufficient. For example, inspectors at half of the plants did not correctly answer basic facts about signs of sensibility. Some private sector companies use additional tools to assess humane handling and improve performance.

Percentage of Inspectors Identifying Enforcement Actions for Stunning



Source: GAO analysis of survey results.

FSIS cannot fully identify trends in its inspection funding and staffing for HMSA, in part because it cannot track HMSA inspection funds separately from the inspection funds spent on food safety activities. FSIS also does not have a current workforce planning strategy for allocating limited staff to inspection activities, including HMSA enforcement. FSIS has strategic, operational, and performance plans for its inspection activities but does not clearly outline goals, needed resources, time frames, or performance metrics and does not have a comprehensive strategy to guide HMSA enforcement.