



Highlights of [GAO-04-246](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

More than 80 percent of the seafood that Americans consume is imported. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is responsible for ensuring that imported seafood is safe and produced under sanitation and safety systems comparable to those of the United States. Since GAO reported in 2001 that FDA's seafood inspection program did not sufficiently protect consumers, additional concerns have arisen about imported seafood containing banned substances, such as certain antibiotics. In this review, GAO was asked to evaluate (1) FDA's progress in implementing the recommendations in the 2001 report and (2) other options to enhance FDA's oversight.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FDA (1) work toward developing a memorandum of understanding with NOAA to use NOAA's resources; (2) make it a priority to establish equivalence or other agreements, starting with countries having high-quality food safety systems; (3) develop a system to track the time involved in processing enforcement actions; (4) give enforcement priority to violations posing the most serious risks; (5) consider accrediting private laboratories; and (6) explore the potential for certifying third-party inspectors. FDA generally agreed with all but the recommendation on making it a priority to establish equivalence or other agreements.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-246](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-246).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Lawrence J. Dyckman at (202) 512-3841 or [dyckmanl@gao.gov](mailto:dyckmanl@gao.gov).

## FOOD SAFETY

# FDA's Imported Seafood Safety Program Shows Some Progress, but Further Improvements Are Needed

## What GAO Found

Since GAO's January 2001 report, FDA's imported seafood safety program has shown some improvement. FDA inspects more foreign firms, and its inspections show that more U.S. seafood importers are complying with its requirements. FDA also slightly increased the number of seafood products it tests at U.S. ports of entry to just over 1 percent. However, FDA still has not established equivalence agreements with seafood exporting countries as GAO recommended in its 2001 report. Equivalence agreements that commit U.S. trading partners to maintain comparable food safety systems are an efficient way to ensure imported seafood safety. Unlike the U.S. Department of Agriculture, FDA is not legally required to certify that countries exporting food products to the United States have equivalent food safety systems. According to a panel of nationally recognized experts that GAO convened to address this and other issues, establishing these types of agreements would shift some of FDA's burden for ensuring seafood safety to foreign governments. This shift, in turn, would allow FDA to focus its limited resources on seafood products from countries with less advanced food safety systems.

FDA also made little progress regarding the recommendation GAO made in 2001 that FDA communicate to U.S. port-of-entry personnel serious deficiencies identified during inspections so that potentially contaminated imported seafood is examined before it enters the United States. GAO found that FDA continues to experience long delays between finding deficiencies and taking action. For example, GAO's review of foreign firm inspection records found that it took an average of 348 days for FDA to alert port-of-entry personnel about serious safety problems identified at six foreign firms. Moreover, GAO found that FDA does not prioritize enforcement actions when violations that pose the most serious public health risk occur or have an automated system to track the time involved in documenting, reviewing, and processing enforcement actions.

FDA officials acknowledged some of the problems that GAO identified regarding FDA's current imported seafood inspection program, but they also raised concerns about limited inspection resources and competing priorities, such as the recent need to implement provisions of the Bioterrorism Act of 2002. GAO identified several options that FDA could consider to augment its resources and enhance its current program, including (1) commissioning seafood inspectors from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Seafood Inspection Program, (2) using state regulatory laboratories and/or private laboratories to augment FDA's testing of imported seafood, and (3) developing a program to use third-party inspectors to augment its program.