



Highlights of [GAO-07-785T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Energy and Commerce, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Each year, about 76 million people contract a foodborne illness in the United States; about 325,000 require hospitalization; and about 5,000 die. The outbreaks of *E. coli* in spinach and *Salmonella* in peanut butter, along with contamination in pet food, have highlighted the risks posed by accidental food contamination. The attacks of September 11, 2001, heightened awareness that the food supply could also be vulnerable to deliberate contamination. This testimony focuses on the (1) role that GAO's high-risk series can play in raising the priority and visibility of the need to transform federal oversight of food safety, (2) fragmented nature of federal oversight of food safety, and (3) limitations in federal food recall programs.

What GAO Recommends

While many of GAO's recommendations to promote the safety of the nation's food supply have been acted upon, others have not yet been addressed. For example, GAO recommended that the executive branch reconvene the President's Council on Food Safety to facilitate interagency coordination. GAO also proposed that Congress enact comprehensive, uniform, and risk-based food safety legislation; analyze alternative organizational food safety structures; and consider legislation giving agencies authority to order food recalls.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-785T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Lisa Shames at (202) 512-3841 or ShamesL@gao.gov.

FEDERAL OVERSIGHT OF FOOD SAFETY

High-Risk Designation Can Bring Needed Attention to Limitations in the Government's Food Recall Programs

What GAO Found

GAO's High-Risk Series is intended to raise the priority and visibility of government programs that are in need of broad-based transformation to achieve greater economy, efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, and sustainability. These reports also help Congress and the executive branch carry out their responsibilities while improving the government's performance and enhancing its accountability for the benefit of the American people. In January 2007, as part of our regular update of this series for each new Congress, GAO designated the federal oversight of food safety as a high-risk area for the first time.

We designated federal oversight of food safety as a high-risk area because of the need to transform this system to reduce risks to public health as well as the economy. While this nation enjoys a plentiful and varied food supply that is generally considered to be safe, the federal oversight of food safety is fragmented, with 15 agencies collectively administering at least 30 laws related to food safety. The two primary agencies are the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which is responsible for the safety of meat, poultry, and processed egg products, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which is responsible for virtually all other food. We have identified examples where the federal government's resources and enforcement activities can better align with the risks of food contamination. For example, the majority of federal expenditures for food safety inspection were directed toward USDA's programs for ensuring the safety of meat, poultry, and egg products; however, USDA is responsible for regulating only about 20 percent of the food supply. In contrast, FDA, which is responsible for regulating about 80 percent of the food supply, accounted for only about 24 percent of expenditures.

Among the reasons we designated federal oversight of food safety as a high-risk area is that limitations in the federal government's food recalls heighten the risk that unsafe food will remain in the food supply and ultimately be consumed. Food recalls are voluntary, and federal agencies responsible for food safety have no authority to compel companies to carry out recalls—with the exception of FDA's authority to require a recall for infant formula. USDA and FDA provided guidance for companies to carry out voluntary recalls. We have reported that USDA and FDA could do a better job carrying out their food recall programs so they can quickly remove potentially unsafe food from the marketplace. At the time of our review, these agencies did not know how promptly and completely companies were carrying out recalls, did not promptly verify that recalls had reached all segments of the distribution chain, and used procedures that may not have been effective to alert consumers to a recall.