



Highlights of [GAO-10-645](#), a report to Congressional Committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. government has a history of employing health surveillance to help limit malady, loss of life, and economic impact of diseases. Recent legislation and presidential directives have called for a robust and integrated biosurveillance capability; that is, the ability to provide early detection and situational awareness of potentially catastrophic biological events. The Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act directed GAO to report on the state of biosurveillance and resource use in federal, state, local, and tribal governments. This report is one in a series responding to that mandate. This report addresses (1) federal efforts that support a national biosurveillance capability and (2) the extent to which mechanisms are in place to guide the development of a national biosurveillance capability. To conduct this work, GAO reviewed federal biosurveillance programs, plans, and strategies and interviewed agency officials from components of 12 federal departments with biosurveillance responsibilities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Homeland Security Council direct the National Security Staff to identify, in consultation with relevant federal agencies, a focal point to lead the development of a national biosurveillance strategy to guide the capability's development.

GAO provided a copy of this draft to the 12 federal departments and the National Security Staff.

[View GAO-10-645 or key components.](#)
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BIOSURVEILLANCE

Efforts to Develop a National Biosurveillance Capability Need a National Strategy and a Designated Leader

What GAO Found

Federal agencies with biosurveillance responsibilities—including the Departments of Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, and Agriculture—have taken or plan to take actions to develop the skilled personnel, training, equipment, and systems that could support a national biosurveillance capability. GAO previously reported that as the threats to national security have evolved over the past decades, so have the skills needed to prepare for and respond to those threats. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) officials stated that skilled personnel shortages threaten the capacity to detect potentially catastrophic biological events as they emerge in humans, animals, or plants. To address this issue, some federal agencies are planning or have taken actions to attract and maintain expertise using fellowships, incentives, and cooperative agreements. Moreover, CDC has called for the development of a national training and education framework to articulate professional roles and competencies necessary for biosurveillance. The Department of Agriculture has also developed training programs to help ensure that diseases and pests that could harm plants or animals can be identified. In addition, federal agencies have taken various actions designed to promote timely detection and situational awareness by developing (1) information sharing and analysis mechanisms, (2) laboratory networks to enhance diagnostic capacity, and (3) equipment and technologies to enhance early detection and situational awareness.

While national biodefense strategies have been developed to address biological threats such as pandemic influenza, there is neither a comprehensive national strategy nor a focal point with the authority and resources to guide the effort to develop a national biosurveillance capability. For example, the National Security Council issued the National Strategy for Countering Biological Threats in November 2009. While this strategy calls for the development of a national strategy for situational awareness, it does not meet the need for a biosurveillance strategy. In addition, this strategy includes objectives that would be supported by a robust and integrated biosurveillance capability, such as obtaining timely and accurate insight on current and emerging risks, but it does not provide a framework to help identify and prioritize investments in a national biosurveillance capability. GAO previously reported that complex interagency efforts, such as developing a robust, integrated, national biosurveillance capability, could benefit from an effective national strategy and a focal point with sufficient time, responsibility, authority, and resources to lead the effort. Efforts to develop a national biosurveillance capability could benefit from a national biosurveillance strategy that guides federal agencies and other stakeholders to systematically identify risks, resources needed to address those risks, and investment priorities. Further, because the mission responsibilities and resources needed to develop a biosurveillance capability are dispersed across a number of federal agencies, efforts to develop a biosurveillance system could benefit from a focal point that provides leadership for the interagency community.