

## Why GAO Did This Study

For more than a decade, GAO has reported on the fragmented nature of federal food safety oversight and how it results in inconsistent oversight, ineffective coordination, and inefficient use of resources. In 2007, GAO added this issue to its high-risk list. In March 2009, the President established the Food Safety Working Group (FSWG) to coordinate federal efforts and establish food safety goals to make food safer.

Section 21 of Public Law 111-139 mandated that GAO identify programs, agencies, offices, and initiatives with duplicative goals and activities. This review examines: (1) steps, if any, that the FSWG has taken to increase collaboration among federal food safety agencies, and (2) options we and others have identified to reduce fragmentation, overlap, and potential duplication in food safety oversight. GAO reviewed information about the FSWG and alternative organizational structures for food safety, and conducted interviews.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Director of OMB, in consultation with the federal food safety agencies, develop a governmentwide performance plan for food safety that includes results oriented goals and performance measures for food safety oversight and a discussion about strategies and resources. OMB declined to comment on a draft of this report. USDA and Health and Human Services provided technical comments.

View [GAO-11-289](#) or key components. For more information, contact Lisa Shames at (202) 512-3841 or [shamesl@gao.gov](mailto:shamesl@gao.gov).

# FEDERAL FOOD SAFETY OVERSIGHT

## Food Safety Working Group Is a Positive First Step but Governmentwide Planning Is Needed to Address Fragmentation

### What GAO Found

Creation of the FSWG elevated food safety as a national priority, demonstrated strong commitment and top leadership support, and was designed to foster interagency collaboration on this cross-cutting issue. The FSWG includes officials from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and other federal agencies. Through the FSWG, federal agencies have taken steps designed to increase collaboration in some areas that cross regulatory jurisdictions—in particular, improving produce safety, reducing *Salmonella* contamination, and developing food safety performance measures.

However, the FSWG has not developed a governmentwide performance plan for food safety that provides a comprehensive picture of the federal government's food safety efforts. When GAO added food safety oversight to its high-risk list in 2007, it said that what remains to be done is to develop a governmentwide performance plan for food safety that is mission based, results oriented, and provides a cross-agency perspective. Officials from OMB, FDA, and USDA told us that the FSWG's July 2009 "key findings" represent the governmentwide plan for food safety. However, most of the goals outlined in the key findings are not results oriented and do not include performance measures. Further, the FSWG has not provided information about the resources that are needed to achieve its goals. Our prior work has identified results oriented goals and performance measures and a discussion of strategies and resources as standard elements of performance plans.

GAO and other organizations have identified options to reduce fragmentation and overlap in food safety oversight in the form of alternative organizational structures, but a detailed analysis of their advantages, disadvantages, and potential implementation challenges has yet to be conducted. GAO has suggested that Congress consider commissioning the National Academy of Sciences or a blue ribbon panel to conduct a detailed analysis of alternative organizational structures for food safety. Some of the alternative organizational structures include a single food safety agency, a food safety inspection agency, a data collection and risk analysis center, and a coordination mechanism led by a central chair. GAO recognizes that reorganizing federal food safety responsibilities would be a complex process that could have short-term disruptions and transition costs. GAO and other organizations have regularly paired proposals for alternative food safety organizations with calls for comprehensive, unified, risk-based food safety legislation. New food safety legislation that was signed into law in January 2011 strengthens a major part of the food safety system; however, it does not apply to the federal food safety system as a whole or create a new risk-based food safety structure.