

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-74](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Although the U.S. food supply is generally considered safe, foodborne illness remains a common, costly, yet largely preventable public health problem. The safety and quality of food involves 16 federal agencies. For more than 4 decades, GAO has reported on the fragmented federal food safety oversight system. Because of potential risks to the economy and to public health and safety, food safety has remained on GAO's list of high-risk areas since 2007.

GAO was asked to examine efforts toward and options for addressing fragmentation in the federal food safety oversight system. This report (1) describes the actions HHS, USDA, and OMB have taken since 2014 to address fragmentation and evaluates the extent to which these agencies have addressed two prior GAO recommendations for government-wide planning and (2) assesses actions that food safety and other experts suggest are needed to improve the federal food safety oversight system. GAO convened an expert meeting, reviewed agency documents, and interviewed agency officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the appropriate entities within the EOP, in consultation with stakeholders, develop a national strategy to guide the federal food safety oversight system and address ongoing fragmentation. HHS, OMB, and the Domestic Policy Council did not comment on the recommendation. USDA disagreed with the need for a national strategy but cited factors to consider should changes be proposed. GAO believes the recommendation should be implemented.

View [GAO-17-74](#). For more information, contact Steve D. Morris at (202) 512-3841 or [morris@gao.gov](mailto:morris@gao.gov).

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## FOOD SAFETY

# A National Strategy Is Needed to Address Fragmentation in Federal Oversight

## What GAO Found

Since 2014, the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), the federal agencies with primary responsibility for food safety oversight, have taken some actions to address fragmentation in the federal food safety oversight system, and HHS has updated its strategic plan to address interagency coordination on food safety. However, USDA has not yet fully implemented GAO's December 2014 recommendation that it describe interagency collaboration on food safety in its strategic and performance planning documents. In addition, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has not addressed GAO's March 2011 recommendation to develop a government-wide plan for the federal food safety oversight system.

At a 2-day meeting GAO hosted in June 2016, 19 food safety and other experts agreed that there is a compelling need to develop a national strategy to address ongoing fragmentation and improve the federal food safety oversight system. This is consistent with a prior GAO finding that complex interagency and intergovernmental efforts can benefit from developing a national strategy. The experts identified the following key elements of such a strategy:

- **Purpose:** The starting point for a national strategy includes defining the problem, developing a mission statement, and identifying goals.
- **Leadership:** The national strategy should establish sustained leadership at the highest level of the administration with authority to implement the strategy and be accountable for its progress. The strategy also needs to identify roles and responsibilities and involve all stakeholders.
- **Resources:** The national strategy should identify staffing and funding requirements and the sources of funding for its implementation.
- **Monitoring:** The national strategy should establish milestones that specify time frames, baselines, and metrics to monitor progress. The strategy should be sufficiently flexible to incorporate changes identified through monitoring and evaluation of progress.
- **Actions:** In addition to long-term actions, the national strategy should include short-term actions to gain traction in improving the food safety system. Actions should focus on preventing, rather than reacting to, outbreaks of foodborne illnesses.

These elements are consistent with characteristics GAO has previously identified as desirable in national strategies. Past efforts to develop high-level strategic planning for food safety have depended on leadership from the Executive Office of the President (EOP). By developing a national strategy to guide the federal food safety oversight system and address ongoing fragmentation, the EOP, in consultation with relevant federal agencies and other stakeholders, could provide a framework for making organizational and resource decisions. Among other things, such a strategy also could provide a framework for addressing GAO's recommendation for a government-wide plan and for removing food safety oversight from GAO's High-Risk List.