

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107613](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. food supply is generally considered safe, but foodborne illness remains a common and costly public health problem. Each year, foodborne illnesses sicken one in six Americans, and thousands die, according to CDC's most recent estimates. A July 2024 outbreak of *Listeria monocytogenes* made at least 61 people in 19 states sick and had caused 10 deaths, as of November 21, 2024. Improving federal oversight of food safety has been on GAO's High Risk List since 2007.

In September 2014 and March 2018, GAO reported on USDA actions to reduce foodborne pathogens and challenges that FSIS faced. In the 2018 report, GAO found that FSIS implemented recommendations from the 2014 report but had not set pathogen standards for many widely available products.

This report provides an update on the status of USDA's efforts. It examines (1) the extent to which FSIS has developed pathogen standards for meat and poultry products and (2) challenges FSIS faces in reducing food pathogens and steps it has taken to address them. GAO reviewed relevant laws, regulations, and USDA documents. GAO also interviewed agency officials and food safety and industry organizations and visited a FSIS laboratory.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that FSIS document its prioritization of pathogen standards and assess risks to human health from any gaps in its oversight and that FSIS and APHIS update their MOU or create a new agreement. FSIS neither agreed nor disagreed.

For more information, contact Steve Morris at (202) 512-3841 or MorrisS@gao.gov.

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FOOD SAFETY

USDA Should Take Additional Actions to Strengthen Oversight of Meat and Poultry

What GAO Found

Salmonella and *Campylobacter* are among the types of bacteria known to commonly cause foodborne illness in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In 2018, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) designated *Salmonella* in "not ready-to-eat" breaded stuffed chicken products an "adulterant"—a poisonous or deleterious substance—if present at certain levels. However, since that time, FSIS has not finalized any new or updated standards for *Campylobacter* and other illness-causing pathogens in meat and poultry products. It paused work on several standards to focus on a framework of standards for *Salmonella* in raw poultry.

Status of Proposed Pathogen Standards as of January 2025

Proposed standard	Year proposed	Status	Year last updated
<i>Salmonella</i> in raw ground beef and beef trimmings	2019	Paused	1996 (when initial standard was set)
<i>Campylobacter</i> in not ready-to-eat comminuted chicken	2019	Paused	2016
<i>Campylobacter</i> in not ready-to-eat comminuted turkey	2019	Paused	2011 (for carcasses) 2016 (for comminuted turkey)
<i>Salmonella</i> in raw comminuted pork and pork cuts	2022	Paused	No previous standards
Framework of standards for <i>Salmonella</i> in raw poultry	2024	Ongoing	2016

Source: Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) information. | GAO-25-107613

Note: Comminuted meat and poultry has been cut, chopped, or ground into small particles. According to FSIS, the term "not ready-to-eat" means that the product is heat treated but not fully cooked and is not shelf stable.

Agency officials said that after finalizing the raw poultry *Salmonella* framework, FSIS plans to use a similar approach to developing the other standards. But they did not know when the framework would be finalized or have a prioritization plan or time frame for resuming work on the other standards. FSIS officials could not confirm that the agency had assessed whether focusing on this framework has caused gaps in its oversight of *Salmonella* in meat and *Campylobacter* in turkey products. By assessing any risks to human health that these gaps created and documenting how it is prioritizing its actions, FSIS will better understand the tradeoffs of its approach to reducing pathogens and associated illnesses.

FSIS faces two ongoing challenges to reducing food pathogens: (1) developing and updating standards, as described above, and (2) its limited control outside of the slaughter and processing plants it oversees. USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has jurisdiction over farms, where animals can become contaminated with pathogens before they are sent to slaughter and processing. FSIS and APHIS's 2014 memorandum of understanding (MOU) for coordinating responses to foodborne illness outbreaks does not identify or detail the agencies' responsibilities in addressing and responding to specific pathogens that occur on farms and can subsequently enter plants. Updating their MOU, or developing a new agreement, will better position FSIS and APHIS to reduce pathogens in meat and poultry products.