

**FOOD SAFETY:****More Disclosure and Data Needed to Clarify Impact of Changes to Poultry and Hog Inspections**

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**HIGHLIGHTS****RECOMMENDATIONS**VIEW REPORT (PDF, 51 PAGES) Share This:    **What GAO Found**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has not thoroughly evaluated the performance of each of the pilot projects over time even though the agency stated it would do so when it announced the pilot projects. For example, in 2011, USDA completed a report evaluating the pilot project at 20 young chicken plants concluding that an inspection system based on the pilot project would ensure equivalent, if not better, levels of food safety and quality than currently provided at plants not in the pilot project. However, among the limitations of its evaluation was the use of snapshots of data for two 2-year periods instead of data for the duration of the pilot project, which has been ongoing for more than a decade. In addition, USDA did not complete an evaluation on or prepare a report evaluating the pilot project at 5 young turkey plants and has no plans to do so because of the small sample size. Nevertheless, in publishing a proposed rule that includes an optional new poultry (chicken and turkey) inspection system, USDA stated that the new system was based on its experience with the pilot projects at young chicken and young turkey plants. As a result, USDA may not have assurance that its evaluation of the pilot project at young chicken plants provides the information necessary to support the proposed rule for both chickens and turkeys. However, the agency will not complete another evaluation before it issues a final rule. USDA has begun drafting a preliminary report evaluating the pilot project at young hog plants using analyses similar to those presented in the report evaluating young chicken plants, suggesting that similar limitations may apply. Agency officials stated that when USDA develops a proposed rulemaking to modify its slaughter inspection system for hogs, the agency will need to decide whether to collect additional data. Without collecting and analyzing additional data, it will be difficult for USDA to draw conclusions about whether the pilot project at young hog plants is meeting its purpose. While the pilot project is ongoing, USDA has the opportunity to collect and analyze additional information.

GAO identified strengths and weaknesses of the three pilot projects based on the views cited most frequently by 11 key stakeholder groups representing industry, labor, consumer advocacy, and animal welfare. On the basis of these views, GAO identified strengths including giving plants responsibility and flexibility for ensuring food safety and quality and allowing USDA inspectors to focus more on food safety activities. GAO identified weaknesses including that training of plant personnel assuming sorting responsibilities on the slaughter line is not required or standardized and that faster line speeds allowed under the pilot projects raise concerns about food safety and worker safety.

USDA did not disclose certain limitations in sources of information it relied on to develop the cost-benefit analysis supporting the proposed rule on modernizing poultry slaughter inspections. GAO identified three sources of information with certain limitations that were not disclosed. For example, USDA did not disclose that it gathered no cost information from young turkey plants in the pilot project. Furthermore, USDA generalized the results from 12 young chicken plants in the pilot project that responded to a 2001 cost survey to the universe of 335 young chicken and young turkey plants in the United States in 2012. As a result, stakeholders did not have complete and accurate information to inform their comments on the proposed rule and its potential impacts.

**Why GAO Did This Study**

USDA inspectors provide continuous inspection of each meat and poultry carcass and its parts that enter interstate commerce. In 1998, USDA began three pilot projects at slaughter plants for healthy young chickens, young turkeys, and young hogs, with a purpose to deploy inspection resources more effectively in accordance with food safety and other consumer protection requirements. Under the pilot projects, plant personnel sort carcasses before USDA's inspection. The pilot projects are to end when a final rule for each species is published. In January 2012, USDA published a proposed rule to modernize poultry slaughter inspections based, in part, on its pilot projects. GAO was asked to review these pilot projects. This report determines (1) the extent to which USDA has evaluated the three pilot projects, (2) strengths and weaknesses of the pilot projects based on the views of key stakeholder groups, and (3) the extent to which USDA disclosed limitations, if any, in sources of information it relied on to develop the proposed rule. GAO reviewed relevant laws and documents and interviewed USDA officials and 11 key industry, labor, consumer advocacy, and animal welfare groups familiar with the pilot projects.

**What GAO Recommends**

GAO recommends that USDA (1) collect and analyze information to determine if the young hog pilot project is meeting its purpose and (2) clearly disclose to the public limitations in the information it relied on for the proposed rule to modernize poultry slaughter inspections. USDA concurred with GAO's recommendations.

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 **Full Report:**  
(PDF, 51 pages)

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