



Homeland Security: Much Is Being Done to Protect Agriculture from a Terrorist Attack, but Important Challenges Remain

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Summary

U.S. agriculture generates more than \$1 trillion per year in economic activity and provides an abundant food supply for Americans and others. Since the September 11, 2001, attacks, there are new concerns about the vulnerability of U.S. agriculture to the deliberate introduction of animal and plant diseases (agroterrorism). Several agencies, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Department of Defense (DOD), play a role in protecting the nation against agroterrorism. GAO examined (1) the federal agencies' roles and responsibilities to protect against agroterrorism, (2) the steps that the agencies have taken to manage the risks of agroterrorism, and (3) the challenges and problems that remain.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, federal agencies' roles and responsibilities were modified in several ways to help protect agriculture from an attack. First, the Homeland Security Act of 2002 established DHS and, among other things, charged it with coordinating U.S. efforts to protect against agroterrorism. The act also transferred a number of agency personnel and functions into DHS to conduct planning, response, and recovery efforts. Second, the President signed a number of presidential directives that further define agencies' specific roles in protecting agriculture. Finally, Congress passed legislation that expanded the responsibilities of USDA and HHS in relation to agriculture security. In carrying out these new responsibilities, USDA and other federal agencies have taken a number of actions. The agencies are coordinating development of plans and protocols to better manage the national response to terrorism, including agroterrorism, and, along with several states, have conducted exercises to test these new protocols and their response capabilities. Federal agencies also have been conducting vulnerability assessments of the agriculture infrastructure; have created networks of laboratories capable of diagnosing animal, plant, and human diseases; have begun efforts to develop a national veterinary stockpile that intends to include vaccines against foreign animal diseases; and have created new federal emergency coordinator positions to help states develop emergency response plans for the agriculture sector. However, the United States still faces complex challenges that limit the nation's ability to respond effectively to an attack against livestock. For example, USDA would not be able to deploy animal vaccines within 24 hours of an outbreak as called for in a presidential directive, in part because the only vaccines currently stored in the United States are for strains of foot and mouth disease, and these vaccines need to be sent to the United Kingdom (U.K.) to be activated for use. There are also management problems that inhibit the effectiveness of agencies' efforts to protect against agroterrorism. For instance, since the transfer of agricultural inspectors from USDA to DHS in 2003, there have been fewer inspections of agricultural products at the nation's ports of entry.

Recommendations

Our recommendations from this work are listed below with a Contact for more information. Status will change from "In process" to "Open," "Closed - implemented," or "Closed - not implemented" based on our follow up work.

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Recommendations for Executive Action

Recommendation: To address significant and complex challenges that limit the United States' ability to quickly and effectively respond to a widespread attack on animal agriculture, the Secretary of Agriculture, in the context of the agency overall risk management efforts, should evaluate the costs and benefits of using rapid diagnostic tools at the site of an outbreak.

Agency Affected: Department of Agriculture

Status: Closed - implemented

Comments: USDA is in the process of evaluating the costs and benefits of using penside rapid diagnostic tools.

Recommendation: To address significant and complex challenges that limit the United States' ability to quickly and effectively respond to a widespread attack on animal agriculture, the Secretary of Agriculture, in the context of the agency overall risk management efforts, should examine the costs and benefits of developing stockpiles of ready-to-use vaccines that can be quickly deployed against animal diseases of primary concern.

Agency Affected: Department of Agriculture

Status: Closed - implemented

Comments: USDA's National Veterinary Stockpile is in the process of examining the costs and benefits of stockpiling ready to use vaccines.

Recommendation: To address significant and complex challenges that limit the United States' ability to quickly and effectively respond to a widespread attack on animal agriculture, the Secretary of Agriculture, in the context of the agency overall risk management efforts, should simplify the decision-making process for determining if and/or when to use vaccines to control an outbreak to ensure that rapid decisions can be made in the event of a terrorist attack.

Agency Affected: Department of Agriculture

Status: Closed - implemented

Comments: According to USDA, the agency is using epidemiological modeling studies that simulate the spread of highly contagious diseases to help simplify the decision making process. USDA is also working with DHS to improve its modeling capabilities. Results of modeling are used to update the decision matrix, fulfilling the intent of the recommendation.

Recommendation: To address management problems that reduce the effectiveness of agencies' routine efforts to protect against agroterrorism, the Secretaries of Homeland Security and Agriculture should work together to identify the reasons for declining agricultural inspections and to identify potential areas for improvement.

Agency Affected: Department of Homeland Security

Status: Closed - implemented

Comments: USDA and DHS conducted joint quality assurance reviews at ports of entry. They identified the reasons for a decline in inspections and are working to correct this.

Agency Affected: Department of Agriculture

Status: Closed - implemented

Comments: USDA and DHS conducted joint quality assurance reviews at ports of entry. They identified the reasons for a decline in inspections and are working to correct this.

Recommendation: To address management problems that reduce the effectiveness of agencies' routine efforts to protect against agroterrorism, the Secretaries of Homeland Security and Agriculture should streamline the flow of information between USDA and DHS agricultural inspectors, and expedite the integration of the two agencies' databases and information technology systems at the port level.

Agency Affected: Department of Homeland Security

Status: Closed - implemented

Comments: USDA and DHS have a memorandum of agreement that provides guidance to better coordinate actions and facilitate operations. According to USDA and DHS, actions have been taken to streamline the flow of information.

Agency Affected: Department of Agriculture

Status: Closed - implemented

Comments: USDA and DHS have a memorandum of agreement that provides guidance to better coordinate actions and facilitate operations. According to USDA, actions have been taken to streamline the flow of information.

Recommendation: To address management problems that reduce the effectiveness of agencies' routine efforts to protect against agroterrorism, the Secretary of Homeland Security should develop a mechanism to promptly and effectively seek input from key stakeholders on national guidance that affects their roles in protecting agriculture and responding to an emergency.

Agency Affected: Department of Homeland Security

Status: Closed - implemented

Comments: According to DHS, the establishment of the Critical Infrastructure Partnership Advisory Council in 2006 provides a formal mechanism to seek input from stakeholders.

Recommendation: To address management problems that reduce the effectiveness of agencies' routine efforts to protect against agroterrorism, the Secretaries of Homeland Security, Agriculture, and Health and Human Services, and the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency should compile relevant after-action reports from test exercises and real-life emergencies and disseminate the reports through the Homeland Security Information Network that DHS is developing.

Agency Affected: Department of Homeland Security

Status: Closed - implemented

Comments: The Department of Homeland Security has posted after action reports on the Homeland Security Information Network and shares information through other venues such as the Government Coordinating Council and Sector Coordinating Council, fulfilling the intent of the recommendation.

Agency Affected: Department of Agriculture

Status: Closed - implemented

Comments: USDA has posted after action reports on the Homeland Security Information Network and other secure sites, fulfilling the intent of the recommendation.

Agency Affected: Department of Health and Human Services

Status: Closed - not implemented

Comments: According to CDC, the agency has standardized after-action reporting procedures currently in place that are refined following events. However, GAO did not receive any further details from CDC and FDA did not have any updates for this recommendation.

Agency Affected: Environmental Protection Agency

Status: Closed - not implemented

Comments: According to EPA, the agency has participated in exercises and real life incidents for the food and agriculture sector, but they have not been the lead and, therefore, do not write the after action reports to post. However, we stand by the recommendation that this is something EPA should do when an incident occurs involving EPA.

Recommendation: To address management problems that reduce the effectiveness of agencies' routine efforts to protect against agroterrorism, the Secretary of Agriculture should develop a strategy to increase the number of Area and Regional Emergency Coordinator positions so that the agency faces less difficulty filling these positions and is better able to assist states in preparing for an agriculture emergency, including a terrorist attack.

Agency Affected: Department of Agriculture

Status: Closed - implemented

Comments: USDA has created and filled additional area emergency coordinator positions

Recommendation: To address management problems that reduce the effectiveness of agencies' routine efforts to protect against agroterrorism, the Secretary of Homeland Security should work to ensure that task lists for the various agencies and working groups engaged in securing agriculture are consistent with national plans and guidelines.

Agency Affected: Department of Homeland Security

Status: Closed - implemented

Comments: In 2006, DHS issued the National Infrastructure Protection Plan (NIPP) providing a unifying structure for the integration of a wide range of efforts for the enhanced protection and resiliency of the nation's critical infrastructure and key resources. Each Sector-Specific Agency is responsible for developing and implementing a Sector-Specific Plan, which details the application of the NIPP framework to the unique characteristics and conditions of their sector. The U.S. Food and Agriculture Sector developed its sector specific plan for critical infrastructure protection in 2007. In addition, the Food and Agriculture Sector meets regularly to discuss Sector activities and requirements, and submits a Sector Annual Report to DHS on its progress.

Recommendation: To address significant and complex challenges that limit the United States' ability to quickly and effectively respond to a widespread attack on animal agriculture, the Secretary of Agriculture, in the context of the agency overall risk management efforts, should expedite the review and issuance of the draft rule on USDA's accreditation process for veterinarians, which would require training in recognizing foreign animal diseases.

Agency Affected: Department of Agriculture

Status: Closed - not implemented

Comments: According to USDA, the supplemental proposed rule for veterinary accreditation was designated as not significant by the Office of Management and Budget on January 24, 2007.

Recommendation: To address management problems that reduce the effectiveness of agencies' routine efforts to protect against agroterrorism, the Secretary of Homeland Security should develop controls to better coordinate and track federally funded research efforts with other agencies to protect against agroterrorism.

Agency Affected: Department of Homeland Security

Status: Closed - not implemented

Comments: According to DHS, it co-chairs a subcommittee that ensures that research and development efforts for foreign animal diseases are coordinated and collaborative. However, it does not have a similar effort for plants.
