



May 2015

# FEDERAL VETERINARIANS

## Efforts Needed to Improve Workforce Planning

Accessible Version

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-495](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

USDA and HHS veterinarians perform crucial work for public and animal health and for emergency response to an economically devastating or highly contagious animal disease—where USDA has a lead role. In 2009, USDA and HHS committed to department-wide efforts to address veterinarian workforce challenges, such as recruitment. In 2010, OPM issued a strategic plan for federal veterinarians to help improve recruiting initiatives and emergency response plans.

GAO was asked to review workforce planning for federal veterinarians. This report examines (1) department-wide efforts USDA and HHS have made for their routine veterinarian workforces, (2) the extent to which USDA has identified the veterinarians needed for emergency response to an animal disease outbreak, and (3) the steps OPM and other federal agencies have taken to achieve the goals of the government-wide strategic plan for the veterinarian workforce. GAO reviewed USDA, HHS, and government-wide workforce plans and interviewed relevant officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that USDA assess and address veterinarian workforce needs for emergency response to an animal disease outbreak, and that OPM review agencies' use of direct-hire authority for veterinarians and monitor and evaluate progress and obtain leadership support for achieving government-wide veterinary workforce goals. USDA partially agreed, noting that it has taken steps to assess its emergency needs. GAO believes the recommendation remains valid. OPM agreed with both recommendations.

View [GAO-15-495](#). For more information, contact John Neumann at (202) 512-3841 or [neumannj@gao.gov](mailto:neumannj@gao.gov).

May 2015

## FEDERAL VETERINARIANS

### Efforts Needed to Improve Workforce Planning

## What GAO Found

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has taken actions to ensure that component agencies include veterinarians in workforce planning efforts for meeting routine needs, but the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has not done so. GAO has identified top leadership involvement as a key principle for workforce planning. For example, USDA provided guidance to its component agencies to assess and develop strategies for its workforce. In accordance with this guidance, USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)—the agency that inspects slaughter plants—developed a workforce plan that included recruitment incentives and other strategies for veterinarians. HHS's Food and Drug Administration (FDA) also included veterinarians in its workforce plans, but HHS did not provide guidance or direction to FDA or other component agencies to do so. GAO recommended in 2009 that USDA and HHS conduct department-wide assessments of their veterinarian workforces. The efforts of USDA and its component agencies met the intent of the recommendation. GAO believes that the recommendation to HHS is still valid. Direction and guidance from HHS could help integrate its component agencies' workforce planning efforts for veterinarians into a department-wide assessment.

USDA participated in a government-wide study to estimate the veterinarians needed to respond to animal disease outbreaks, but because of limitations in the study, the estimates are not reliable for purposes of effective emergency response planning. For example, the estimates were based on a USDA model that had not been verified or validated. Moreover, USDA has not developed a detailed plan to augment or train its workforce to respond to an economically devastating or highly contagious outbreak. Without reliable estimates of the veterinarians needed or how it will augment and train its workforce, USDA cannot ensure it will have enough veterinarians to adequately respond.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and other federal agencies have taken steps toward achieving the goals outlined in OPM's government-wide strategic plan for the veterinarian workforce, primarily through an interagency group OPM created. However, in each of the three goals, the interagency group did not follow through on next steps and made limited progress. For example, to improve recruiting, OPM granted government-wide direct-hire authority in 2009 to enable agencies to hire qualified veterinarians without regard to certain federal hiring requirements. However, OPM did not follow through on plans to review agencies' use of the authority. As a result, OPM cannot determine the overall impact on recruitment or whether the authority should continue or be modified. Monitoring and evaluating progress toward human capital goals is among the key principles GAO has identified for effective strategic workforce planning. According to OPM officials, the group did not consistently monitor progress toward goals in part because it did not have sufficient leadership support from participating agencies. OPM and group members, including USDA and HHS, recognize a need for a higher level of leadership but have not identified officials to serve in this capacity. Obtaining leadership support—including from USDA and HHS, the major federal employers of civilian veterinarians—and monitoring and evaluating progress could help emphasize the importance of completing work under these goals and better position OPM to ensure progress or take appropriate actions if progress is limited.

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## Abbreviations

APHIS	Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
ARS	Agricultural Research Service
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOD	Department of Defense
FDA	Food and Drug Administration
FSIS	Food Safety and Inspection Service
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
NAHERC	National Animal Health Emergency Response Corps
NIH	National Institutes of Health
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
TMAC	Talent Management Advisory Council
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture

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May 26, 2015

The Honorable Kurt Schrader  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Ted Yoho  
House of Representatives

Veterinarians employed at federal agencies make up a small portion—less than 2 percent—of the federal workforce but perform crucial work related to public and animal health. For example, veterinarians at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) help protect and maintain the health of American livestock and poultry on farms and ranches, inspect animals at slaughter plants to help ensure the safety of meat and poultry products, and oversee the humane treatment of food animals during slaughter. Under the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) National Response Framework for disasters and emergencies, USDA also has a lead role in the emergency response to an animal disease outbreak, whether the disease is naturally or intentionally introduced into the United States. Veterinarians at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) conduct and support research related to animal and human health and disease, including animal diseases that could spread to humans. Also, HHS veterinarians oversee the welfare of animals used in research; and ensure that animal drugs, animal feed, and food from medically treated animals is safe. These two departments are the major employers of civilian veterinarians in the federal workforce.<sup>1</sup>

As with all professions in the federal government, departments and their component agencies are responsible for hiring and maintaining veterinarian workforces sufficient to meet their missions. We concluded in 2009 that the federal government did not have a comprehensive

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<sup>1</sup>This report focuses on veterinarians in the civilian federal workforce. The Department of Defense also employs veterinarians, the majority of whom work for the Army as active-duty veterinarians or as part of the Army’s veterinary reserve corps. These veterinarians are responsible for caring for service and research animals, ensuring food safety at military installations, and conducting intelligence work related to bioterrorism, among other things. In addition, the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, overseen by HHS, employs veterinarians as part of its cadre of uniformed officers deployed in various federal departments and agencies.

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understanding of the sufficiency of its veterinarian workforce.<sup>2</sup> In addition, we found that USDA and HHS had not assessed the sufficiency of their veterinarian workforces department-wide, even though their component agencies had identified concerns about these workforces. Agencies' concerns included challenges in recruiting veterinarians with specialized qualifications, noncompetitive salaries, and a potential shortage resulting from the number of veterinarians who would be eligible to retire. We recommended, among other things, that USDA and HHS conduct department-wide assessments of their veterinarian workforces based on workforce assessments by their component agencies, and that the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) determine, based on USDA's and HHS's department-wide assessments, whether a government-wide effort was needed to address insufficiencies in the current and future veterinarian workforce.

In response to our 2009 report, USDA and HHS committed to department-wide efforts to address their veterinarian workforce issues.<sup>3</sup> In addition, in responses to questions for the record from a Senate subcommittee hearing, USDA stated that it planned to pursue a department-wide workforce plan for veterinarians, and HHS stated that it was developing short-, mid-, and long-term strategies to address its veterinarian workforce needs.<sup>4</sup> In addition, OPM created an interagency group—the Talent Management Advisory Council (TMAC)—to provide broad-based leadership in identifying and addressing the needs of the veterinarian workforce government-wide, including advising agency leaders and OPM on ways to enhance outreach efforts.<sup>5</sup> In 2010, OPM also issued a fiscal year 2011-2015 strategic workforce plan for the federal veterinarian workforce, with the intent that the plan be used by agencies to improve their recruiting initiatives and emergency response

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<sup>2</sup>GAO, *Veterinarian Workforce: Actions Are Needed to Ensure Sufficient Capacity for Protecting Public and Animal Health*, GAO-09-178 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 4, 2009).

<sup>3</sup>The status of our recommendations is discussed later in this report.

<sup>4</sup>Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce and the District of Columbia, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hearing on Homeland Security and the Federal Veterinarian Workforce*, 111<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., Feb. 26, 2009, [125-128].

<sup>5</sup>OPM serves as the group's facilitator, and members include representatives of USDA, HHS and other departments and agencies that employ veterinarians. (See appendix 1 for a full list of TMAC members.)

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plans. OPM's strategic workforce plan included the following three goals to be addressed by TMAC:

- obtain a comprehensive understanding of the federal veterinary workforce,
- improve recruiting and retention results for the federal veterinary workforce, and
- enhance efforts to identify the veterinary workforce needed during emergency events.

You asked us to review issues related to the federal veterinarian workforce.<sup>6</sup> This report examines (1) department-wide efforts USDA and HHS have made for their routine veterinarian workforces; (2) the extent to which USDA has identified the veterinarians needed to augment its workforce for an emergency response to an animal disease outbreak; and (3) the steps, if any, that OPM and other federal agencies have taken to achieve the goals of the government-wide strategic plan for the veterinarian workforce.

To examine the department-wide efforts USDA and HHS have made for their routine veterinarian workforces, we obtained and evaluated workforce plans and other documents related to workforce planning from USDA, HHS, and their component agencies that are major employers of civilian veterinarians within each department. These component agencies included USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), and the Agricultural Research Service (ARS); and HHS' Food and Drug Administration (FDA), National Institutes of Health (NIH), and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). We evaluated the documents to determine the extent to which they assessed their veterinarian workforces and included workforce planning strategies specifically targeting their veterinarian workforces. We also examined the extent to which agencies followed key principles GAO has identified for effective strategic workforce planning, in particular, for assessing their veterinarian workforces and developing

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<sup>6</sup>This request was originally made by Kurt Schrader, Ranking Member of the House Subcommittee on Horticulture, Research, Biotechnology, and Foreign Agriculture, House Agriculture Committee, and Representative Ted Yoho. Representative Schrader is no longer on the Committee.

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strategies to fill any gaps.<sup>7</sup> In addition, we interviewed department-level and component-level human resources managers and component-level program managers of veterinarians regarding their workforce planning processes for veterinarians.

To examine the extent to which USDA has identified the veterinarians needed to augment its workforce for an emergency response to an animal disease outbreak, we reviewed regulations, plans, assessments, scenarios, agreements, and training programs prepared by USDA and DHS for emergency responses requiring a surge capacity of federal veterinarians. We also interviewed USDA and DHS officials regarding these efforts. We compared USDA's efforts to guidance in DHS's National Response Framework for development of emergency response plans.

To examine the steps that OPM and other federal agencies have taken to achieve the goals of the government-wide strategic plan for the veterinarian workforce, we observed TMAC meetings; analyzed OPM and TMAC documents, such as minutes of meetings and documents related to each of the three goals in the government-wide strategic plan; and interviewed OPM, DHS, HHS, and USDA officials about their participation in TMAC. For additional perspectives on TMAC, as well as other issues related to workforce planning for federal veterinarians, we interviewed officials from three nonfederal organizations that OPM designated as TMAC partners—the American Veterinary Medical Association, the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges, and the National Association of Federal Veterinarians. We compared the steps OPM and other federal agencies have taken to key principles GAO has identified for effective strategic workforce planning, in particular, for monitoring and evaluating the progress toward human capital goals.

We also obtained data on the number of veterinarians at USDA and HHS from OPM's Enterprise Human Resources Integration program—OPM's database for government-wide human resources information. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for providing

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<sup>7</sup>To identify strategic workforce planning principles we reviewed documents from organizations with government-wide responsibilities for or expertise in workforce planning, such as OPM, and our own reports, and testimonies on federal agencies workforce planning and human capital management efforts. See GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, GAO-04-39 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003) for additional details.



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information on the number of federal veterinarians employed as veterinarians at the component agencies that we examined—FSIS, APHIS, and ARS at USDA, and FDA, NIH, and CDC at HHS. We made this determination by, among other things, performing edit checks in the program that generated the data; comparing the number of veterinarians USDA and HHS component agencies supplied to us with the numbers from OPM's database; and following up with agency officials to resolve discrepancies, as needed.

We conducted this performance audit from April 2014 to May 2015 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## Background

USDA, HHS, and other federal agencies employ veterinarians under the veterinary medical science occupational series, as well as other occupational series.<sup>8</sup> As of fiscal year 2014, federal agencies employed about 2,100 veterinarians under the veterinary medical science occupational series, according to data from OPM.<sup>9</sup> Veterinarians at USDA were concentrated in three component agencies—FSIS, APHIS, and ARS. Veterinarians at HHS were also concentrated in three component agencies—FDA, NIH, and CDC. As shown in table 1, the specific missions of the veterinarians vary by agency. Besides the routine missions, APHIS is responsible for implementing an emergency

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<sup>8</sup>OPM defines an occupational series as a subdivision of an occupational group or job family consisting of positions similar as to specialized line of work and qualification requirements. Series are designated by a title and number. Work classified under the veterinary medical science series, 0701, involves promoting the health and welfare of both animals and the public through diagnosis, treatment, prevention, and understanding of animal diseases; conservation of animal resources; and advancement of veterinary medical knowledge.

<sup>9</sup>Generally, we use the term "veterinarian" to apply to civilians in the veterinary medical science occupational series and also in other occupational series that agencies consider as part of their strategic workforce planning efforts for veterinarians. However, OPM could provide only the number of veterinarian medical officers in the 0701 series, who are most likely the largest segment actually performing duties as veterinarians.

response, including coordination of veterinary services, to an outbreak of an economically devastating or highly contagious animal disease.<sup>10</sup>

**Table 1: Missions and Numbers of USDA and HHS Veterinary Medical Officers (occupational series 0701) in Selected USDA and HHS Component Agencies as of September 30, 2014**

Department or agency	Routine mission of veterinarians	Number <sup>a</sup>
<b>U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)</b>		
Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)	Inspect animals at slaughter plants to ensure food safety and humane treatment during slaughter.	986
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)	Protect the health of livestock and poultry, inspect live animal imports at ports of entry, and monitor wildlife for animal disease.	624
Agricultural Research Service (ARS)	Research animal diseases.	39
<b>Health and Human Services (HHS)</b>		
Food and Drug Administration (FDA)	Ensure animal drugs and feed are safe; food from medically treated animals is safe to eat; and support the regulatory mission of the agency's Office of Medical Products and Tobacco.	124
National Institutes of Health (NIH)	Provide lab animal care and specialized research services.	77
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)	Conduct research and investigate human disease outbreaks of animal origin.	28

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management data. | GAO-15-495

<sup>a</sup>The number includes veterinarians classified under the veterinary medical science series, 0701, but not those under other occupational series, such as managerial or interdisciplinary positions that are open to but not required to be filled by veterinarians. Also, veterinarians in the Public Health Service Commissioned Corps are not included, although they can be classified in the 0701 series. For example, NIH officials told us the agency had 14 Commissioned Corps veterinarians at the beginning of fiscal year 2015 and that group is not included in the NIH section of the table. Similarly, in providing technical comments on a draft of this report, CDC stated that its workforce included veterinarians not classified in the 0701 series, such as those in the agency's Epidemic Intelligence Service.

In 2001, we designated strategic human capital management, which includes workforce planning, as a high-risk area of government operations. In 2015, we retained the high-risk designation because current budget and long-term fiscal pressures, coupled with a potential wave of employee retirements that could produce gaps in leadership and institutional knowledge, threaten the government's capacity to effectively

<sup>10</sup>APHIS determines the level of federal response and resources required based on the scope and severity of an incident. In some cases, enough federal, state, and local personnel may be available within the state or local area for a response. Other cases may require full participation among many federal, state, local, and tribal agencies. A large-scale outbreak may require total mobilization of APHIS employees, for example, if a national outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease occurred. Foot-and-mouth disease is a highly contagious viral disease among livestock.

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address a wide range of national issues. OPM, individual agencies, and Congress have all taken important steps over the last few years that will better position the government to close current and emerging critical skills gaps that are undermining agencies' abilities to meet their vital missions.<sup>11</sup> However, the area remains high risk because more work is needed to implement specific corrective strategies for addressing critical skills gaps and evaluating the results of those strategies.<sup>12</sup> In particular, in our 2015 update, we found that OPM and agencies had partially met the leadership criterion for removal from the High Risk List but need to sustain senior leadership's focus—for example, on defining and implementing corrective actions to narrow skills gaps through talent management and other strategies.

Strategic workforce planning addresses two critical needs: (1) aligning an organization's human capital program with its current and emerging mission and programmatic goals and (2) developing long-term strategies for acquiring, developing, and retaining staff to achieve programmatic goals. We have recognized the following five key principles for strategic workforce planning to address these needs:<sup>13</sup>

- involve top management, employees, and other stakeholders in developing, communicating, and implementing the strategic workforce plan;
- determine the critical skills and competencies that will be needed to achieve current and future programmatic results;
- develop strategies to address gaps in number, deployment, and alignment of human capital approaches for enabling and sustaining the contributions of all critical skills and competencies;
- build the capability needed to address administrative, educational, and other requirements important to support workforce planning strategies; and
- monitor and evaluate progress toward human capital goals and how human capital results have helped achieve program goals.

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<sup>11</sup>For more on GAO's assessment of OPM's and other agencies' efforts that are needed to address skills gaps see GAO, *Federal Workforce: OPM and Agencies Need to Strengthen Efforts to Identify and Close Mission Critical Skills Gaps*, GAO-15-223 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 30, 2015).

<sup>12</sup>GAO, *High Risk Series: An Update*, GAO-15-290 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 11, 2015).

<sup>13</sup>GAO-04-39.

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In addition, OPM provides information and guidance on a wide range of strategies that departments and agencies can use to achieve and maintain a workforce sufficient to accomplish their missions. OPM can also authorize departments to use additional strategies to address workforce shortage situations if standard strategies prove insufficient. For example, OPM can approve agencies' use of direct-hire authority when a critical hiring need or severe shortage of candidates exists. Direct-hire authority enables an agency to hire any qualified applicant without regard to certain federal hiring requirements, such as competitive rating and ranking and veterans' preference.

Since we issued our report on the federal veterinarian workforce in 2009, other organizations issued reports on the veterinarian workforce across employment sectors, including the federal government. In particular, according to a 2013 report by the National Research Council, the federal veterinarian workforce faced an impending mass retirement, making workforce planning in the federal government critically important.<sup>14</sup>

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## USDA and Some Component Agencies Conduct Workforce Planning for Veterinarians, but HHS Has Not Done So Department-Wide

USDA has taken actions to ensure that component agencies include veterinarians in workforce planning efforts for meeting routine needs, but HHS has not done so. Direction and guidance from HHS could help integrate its component agencies' workforce planning efforts for veterinarians.

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## USDA Has Provided Direction and Guidance to Component Agencies for Conducting Workforce Planning for Veterinarians

USDA has provided direction to ensure that its component agencies include veterinarians in workforce planning efforts for meeting routine needs. The efforts of USDA and its component agencies met the intent of our recommendation for a department-wide assessment of its veterinarian workforce. In addition, USDA human capital officials said they considered the workforce planning efforts of their component agencies sufficient to

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<sup>14</sup>National Research Council, *Workforce Needs in Veterinary Medicine* (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 31, 2013).

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meet their commitment in 2009 to a Senate subcommittee to conduct a department-wide assessment.

In particular, since our 2009 report, USDA has developed guidance on workforce planning for its component agencies that have veterinarians, and the department initiated a process to evaluate the component agencies' workforce plans. According to an official from USDA's Office of Human Resources Management, in December 2012, the Secretary of Agriculture directed component agencies to create human capital and workforce plans that would include veterinarians. USDA's guidance specified workforce planning steps for component agencies to assess their workforces and develop workforce planning strategies, including for occupations considered critical to agencies' missions, such as veterinarians. For example, the guidance called for agencies to analyze the workforce needed to meet future workloads, identify any gaps in the workforce to meet future needs, and develop human capital goals. Human resources officials said that 2014 was the first year they began reviewing component agencies' workforce plans and that they will conduct more formal reviews of the plans in 2015 to examine, for example, whether agencies conduct workforce planning on a periodic basis and whether their plans consider changes in mission and technology.

As described below, USDA component agencies that consider veterinarians to be critical to their missions—FSIS and APHIS—have assessed and developed varying strategies for their veterinarian workforces needed to meet routine needs.

- **FSIS.** Veterinarians are one of four mission-critical occupations at FSIS. The agency tracks short-term needs for veterinarians and vacancies at slaughter plants on an ongoing basis, and retirement eligibility is calculated over a 6-year time frame. For example, according to the agency's Director of Field Operations, FSIS tracks the vacancy rate of veterinarians, which he estimated was about 10 percent in 2014. In addition, the agency's recruitment plan for fiscal year 2014 projected that about 43 percent of FSIS veterinarians would be eligible to retire by fiscal year 2018. FSIS has developed multiple workforce planning strategies to address needs identified through its assessments. As a short-term strategy, the agency employs a group of relief veterinarians—mostly full-time employees—who travel to various plants to fill in when the veterinarian assigned to a plant is absent for personal or other reasons, such as a position vacancy. Other longer-term strategies include (1) recruitment incentives for

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difficult-to-staff duty locations, (2) use of direct-hire authority, and (3) agency attendance at veterinary conferences and career fairs to attract students. The agency's recruitment plan also includes efforts to target veterinary students, such as visits to colleges of veterinary medicine.<sup>15</sup>

- **APHIS.** Veterinarians are one of nine mission-critical occupations at APHIS. The agency tracks attrition among its veterinarians on a monthly basis and calculates retirement eligibility for a 5-year period. For example, Veterinary Services—the agency's operational unit with the largest number of veterinarians—prepared a workforce plan for 2011 to 2015 suggesting that 45 percent of its veterinarians would be eligible to retire by fiscal year 2016. In addition, the plan stated that an expected national shortage of veterinary medical officers may impact the unit's ability to effectively meet mission requirements and respond to animal health emergencies, and that the unit would need to enhance recruitment and retention efforts to maintain current levels of mission-critical occupations. In fiscal year 2014, the unit prepared a staffing plan with a target level of 550 to 575 veterinarians and began hiring veterinarians with the expectation that it would meet the target level in fiscal year 2015. Another operational unit within APHIS conducted a study and issued a draft report in April 2014 on its veterinarian workload and staffing levels, helping the agency to assess workforce needs.<sup>16</sup> APHIS' workforce planning strategies targeting veterinarians include an internship program and use of direct-hire authority granted by OPM. In addition, agency officials said they are planning to initiate a cadre of veterinarians similar to the FSIS group that can fill in temporarily when vacancies or other needs occur, but the officials did not provide a time frame for commencing this initiative.

Veterinarians are not considered to be a mission-critical occupation at ARS. Instead, the agency's draft human capital management plan grouped veterinary medical officers together with other scientific occupations at the agency. According to the plan, occupations within this

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<sup>15</sup>As another longer-term effort, FSIS initiated a demonstration project in 2009 to allow for pay-for-performance and flexibility in salaries for entry-level positions and pay increases for promotions. FSIS determined that the demonstration project did not meet its needs and announced the project's termination in December 2013.

<sup>16</sup>The draft report recommended an increase in the number of veterinarians from 12 to 14 to address the unit's increasing workload.

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group may be targeted for priority human capital activity in the future. The approach used by ARS is consistent with our key principles for effective strategic workforce planning, in which the scope of agencies' efforts to identify the skills and competencies needed for their future workforces varies considerably, depending on the needs and interests of a particular agency. Agencies may elect to focus their analysis on only the skills and competencies most critical to achieving their goals.

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### HHS Has Not Provided Direction or Guidance for Component Agencies' Workforce Planning for Veterinarians

HHS does not have an approach similar to USDA's efforts to guide its component agencies' workforce planning for veterinarians for meeting routine needs. In 2009, we recommended that HHS conduct a department-wide assessment of their veterinarian workforces based on assessments completed by their component agencies. Key principles for strategic workforce planning include involving top leadership to help provide stability as the workforce plan is being developed and implemented and ensure that planning strategies are thoroughly implemented and sustained over time. Top leadership involvement can also help integrate workforce planning efforts with other key management planning efforts, such as succession planning, to ensure that such initiatives work together to achieve the agency's goals.<sup>17</sup>

HHS has not conducted a department-wide assessment of its veterinarian workforce even though HHS officials agreed to do so in response to a question from a Senate subcommittee shortly after our 2009 report. In addition, HHS officials did not provide department direction or guidance for the development of workforce planning for veterinarians at its component agencies. Furthermore, the department has not reviewed the results of its component agencies' efforts. As described below, component agencies' workforce planning efforts occur at the agency level in FDA, and at the level of individual centers, institutes, or offices within CDC and NIH. HHS leadership and direction could help integrate these component agencies' workforce planning efforts for veterinarians at the department-wide level. For this reason, we believe our previous recommendation to HHS remains valid and should be fully implemented.

FDA included veterinarians in its workforce plans, although HHS did not provide guidance or direction to FDA or other component agencies to do

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<sup>17</sup>GAO-04-39.

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so. Within FDA, veterinarians are a mission-critical occupation together with other scientific occupations, such as biologists and chemists. Veterinarians within FDA are concentrated in the Center for Veterinary Medicine, which prepared a separate human capital plan for fiscal year 2012 to fiscal year 2016. According to the plan, the center's workforce increased by about 30 percent since 2006, primarily due to a hiring surge initiative that targeted selected science and medical positions, including veterinarians. The increase supported the expansion of the center's regulatory responsibilities. The plan stated that the center would conduct annual workforce planning to determine the workforce composition needed to meet future requirements. The center's recruitment and retention strategies include use of direct-hire authority for veterinarians, as well as exit interviews with departing employees to identify the root causes of turnover and assist in the development of targeted retention solutions.

In contrast, HHS component agencies that do not consider veterinarians to be a mission-critical occupation—NIH and CDC—have not assessed or developed agency-wide strategies specifically for their veterinarian workforces. As discussed above, this approach is consistent with our key principles for effective strategic workforce planning, in which the scope of agencies' efforts to identify the skills and competencies needed for their future workforces depends on agencies' needs. Accordingly, NIH and CDC have assessed veterinarians together with other occupations as part of the agencies' overall workforce planning efforts. NIH and CDC officials told us that workforce planning for veterinarians would instead occur at the level of individual centers, institutes, or offices within their agencies. Officials from both agencies said they had not gathered information or evaluated whether their subcomponents had conducted workforce planning for their veterinarian workforces.<sup>18</sup> NIH and CDC officials stated that not designating veterinarians as a mission-critical occupation did not mean that they were not vital to the agency's mission; rather, they said that they only apply the mission-critical designation to professions or occupational series involving a larger segment of the organizations' workforce.

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<sup>18</sup>The Director of NIH established a working group that reported on veterinarians and other professions in 2014. The working group, which included NIH officials and experts outside the federal government, focused on veterinarians and other scientists who received NIH grants. The report did not include recommendations specific to the NIH federal veterinarian workforce.



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## USDA Has Not Identified Reliable Estimates of Veterinarians Needed to Augment Its Workforce for Emergency Response to Animal Disease Outbreaks

USDA's APHIS has not developed reliable estimates of the number of veterinarians needed for emergency response to animal disease outbreaks of various types. Instead, APHIS participated in a study led by TMAC to determine the veterinarian workforce needed to respond to a regional and a large-scale disease outbreak. However, because of limitations in the study, the estimates of the number of veterinarians needed are not reliable for purposes of effective emergency planning and response. Moreover, APHIS' plans for an emergency response do not include details on how it will augment its workforce to respond to a large-scale emergency.

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## APHIS Has Not Developed Reliable Estimates of the Number of Veterinarians Needed for Emergency Response

Under the National Response Framework, USDA is the lead agency for emergency response to significant incidents threatening the health of animals. USDA has delegated its authority to act in response to such incidents to APHIS. The National Response Framework stated that response planning should address detailed resourcing, personnel, and sourcing requirements.<sup>19</sup> A key goal of APHIS is to ensure adequate personnel to achieve the objectives of an emergency response to an animal disease outbreak. APHIS' plan for achieving this goal includes determining the expertise needed, such as veterinary expertise, and the number of personnel needed for each expertise type.

However, APHIS has not developed reliable estimates of the number of veterinarians needed for emergency response to an animal disease outbreak, such as a large-scale outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in livestock or a limited outbreak of Newcastle disease in poultry.<sup>20</sup> Instead,

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<sup>19</sup>The Federal Emergency Management Agency developed the *National Response Framework* as a blueprint for how the nation conducts response to all types of disasters and emergencies, regardless of cause. For further information on the framework's elements of effective response and response planning, see GAO, *Disaster Response: Criteria for Developing and Validating Effective Response Plans*, GAO-10-969T (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 22, 2010).

<sup>20</sup>Foot-and-mouth disease is a highly contagious viral disease of cloven-hoofed animals such as cattle, swine, and sheep. Infected animals develop a fever and blisters on their tongue, lips, and between their hooves. The disease leaves animals that survive debilitated and causes severe losses in meat and milk production. The disease does not have human health implications. Newcastle disease is a highly infectious virus that can spread rapidly among poultry.

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APHIS participated in a study led by TMAC to determine the veterinarian workforce needed to respond to a foot-and-mouth disease outbreak of two different scales. Specifically, APHIS developed a model that TMAC used to estimate that an outbreak in a single region would require at least 880 veterinarians, and that a national-scale outbreak would require approximately 6,000 veterinarians. The model developed by APHIS provides information about how many individuals might be required to respond during each day of an outbreak, whether there are a sufficient number of qualified personnel, and when shortages may occur.

The TMAC report, as well as APHIS and DHS officials involved in the TMAC study, cited various limitations in the study's estimates of the number of veterinarians needed for emergency response, as discussed below. Because of these limitations, we determined that the estimates are not reliable for purposes of effective emergency response and response planning, as called for under the National Response Framework. Identifying expertise and other capabilities needed to prepare for an outbreak is complex because the capabilities required will change according to the outbreak scenario. Nevertheless, it is important to provide a benchmark for planning purposes, particularly in the face of uncertainty. According to DHS, such planning helps determine how prepared we are as a nation, how prepared we need to be, and how to prioritize efforts to effectively respond to an emergency.<sup>21</sup> The limitations in the TMAC study included the following:

- The estimates were based on an early release of the APHIS model that had not been verified or validated. According to APHIS officials, the model would need to be further developed in order for the agency to develop estimates it would consider useful, but they did not provide any information on plans to further develop the model.
- The geographic scope of modeling for both national-scale and regional outbreaks was limited. For example, the national-scale scenario did not include dairy or swine intensive states that, if affected by an outbreak, would potentially increase the workload of a response.

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<sup>21</sup>For more information on capabilities-based planning, see GAO, *Avian Influenza: USDA Has Taken Important Steps to Prepare for Outbreaks but Better Planning Could Improve Response*, GAO-07-652 (Washington, D.C.: June 11, 2007).

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- The estimates did not account for strategies APHIS may use during an emergency response, such as assigning veterinarians to oversee rather than directly perform vaccinations of livestock or other critical activities. According to APHIS officials, such a strategy would reduce the number of veterinarians needed for a response.

Other than the TMAC study on responding to outbreaks such as a foot-and-mouth disease scenario, APHIS has not developed estimates of the number of veterinarians needed for an emergency response. APHIS officials said they did not develop estimates because there are many different scenarios an outbreak could take and many different responses. For example, APHIS officials said that they could rely on veterinary technicians and other personnel to a greater extent than contemplated in the TMAC study. APHIS officials also said that the agency had not made a greater effort to plan the number of veterinarians needed for an emergency response because the agency considers other aspects of planning for an outbreak, such as determining the supplies needed and ensuring the right incident command is in place, to be a higher priority. Such aspects are part of response planning, as discussed in the National Response Framework, but are to be integrated with the personnel needed to respond to incidents. Without reliable estimates of the veterinarians needed for an emergency, it will be difficult for APHIS to be prepared and have a sufficient number of veterinarians to respond to the most serious animal disease outbreaks.

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### APHIS Plans Do Not Include Details on How to Augment Its Workforce for an Emergency Response

According to APHIS officials, the agency's target level for the number of veterinarians it employs—550 to 575 in fiscal year 2015—is based on the agency's routine workload and not on the needs of an emergency response. As a result, even though it may ask or assign agency employees to participate in a large-scale emergency response, the agency may not have sufficient veterinarians to respond to an animal disease outbreak. Moreover, according to the APHIS Deputy Administrator for Veterinary Services, not all APHIS veterinarians could be spared from their routine duties in order to be deployed during an emergency.

APHIS officials recognize that they may need to augment their veterinarian workforce during certain emergencies and have established various arrangements to help their agency do so. However, APHIS officials have not identified the number of veterinarians the agency expects to be available under these arrangements in order to fill any gap

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between the number of APHIS veterinarians onboard and the number that might be needed during an emergency. Specifically,

- **National Animal Health Emergency Response Corps (NAHERC).** Under NAHERC, APHIS maintains a list of preapproved veterinarians and veterinary technicians who are willing to become temporary federal employees in an emergency. According to information from APHIS, NAHERC had 971 veterinarians as of January 2015. A NAHERC member's decision to participate in an emergency response when the corps is activated is voluntary, and APHIS officials said they do not expect all members to be available in any given response. For example, according to APHIS, about one-quarter of the veterinarians responded to a request for immediate activation in an exercise conducted in June 2012. In addition, an APHIS emergency response official told us that the agency stopped processing NAHERC applications in fiscal year 2013 because the agency's human resources staff needed to focus on hiring full-time employees to replace positions lost due to reductions in the agency's budget. Information provided by APHIS showed that, as of January 2015, the number of NAHERC veterinarians had not increased since the end of fiscal year 2013.
- **Other federal agencies.** Under an agreement with the Department of Defense (DOD) signed in June 2006, APHIS can request veterinarians—in particular, from the Army Veterinary Corps—for an emergency response to an animal disease outbreak. However, according to an APHIS emergency response official, DOD veterinarians would provide at most a support role and would not be available in numbers great enough to meet the potential need. For example, the Army Veterinary Corps' mission to support the national military strategy could limit the number of Army Veterinary Corps veterinarians available to assist APHIS in an emergency response. In addition, as of March 2015, the agency had not finalized similar agreements with other federal agencies, such as HHS, although HHS officials said the Public Health Service Commissioned Corps veterinarians would be ready to participate under the National Response Framework without an agreement. According to APHIS officials, veterinarians at other agencies—including other USDA agencies—may not be available or have the training needed to participate in an emergency response. For example, the APHIS Deputy Administrator for Veterinary Services estimated that no more than 10 percent of veterinarians at FSIS—the largest single employer of federal veterinarians—would be available during an emergency.

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- **Other countries.** In May 2014, APHIS entered into a multilateral arrangement with Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom that established a framework for one country to request veterinarians from another country to participate in an emergency response to an animal disease outbreak. According to an APHIS emergency response official, the veterinarians requested under this framework would not provide an initial rapid response but would instead provide a support role, although the agreement did not provide this level of detail.

USDA and DHS officials said that, in addition to augmenting the APHIS veterinarian workforce for an emergency response, APHIS needs to ensure that responders are trained appropriately. According to the APHIS training and exercise plan for emergency preparedness and response, training provides the critical knowledge, skills, and abilities to respond to emerging or other animal diseases. NAHERC veterinarians may choose to take online training related to specific types of animal diseases and various aspects of emergency response, such as on personal protective equipment and vaccination. However, according to APHIS officials, the agency has limited funds to pay for NAHERC veterinarians to participate in exercises that could help them build skills and practice techniques before an actual incident occurs. In addition, APHIS' training and exercise plan does not provide details on how the agency will ensure that veterinarians from NAHERC, other agencies, and other countries have adequate training and exercise opportunities for participation in an emergency response to an animal disease outbreak. For example, the plan does not indicate how APHIS will train NAHERC veterinarians—most of whom, according to APHIS officials, are private practitioners who deal primarily with small animals—to overcome a skills gap the agency has identified related to handling large farm animals in the field. APHIS officials said that they expect to obtain funding for training when an emergency occurs. However, without planning for the training needed for its veterinarian workforce and those that could augment its workforce, it will be difficult for APHIS to provide reasonable assurance that it has the workforce that is sufficiently equipped to handle an emergency response.

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## OPM and Federal Agencies Have Taken Limited Steps to Achieve Government-Wide Goals for Veterinarians

OPM and other federal agencies have taken steps toward achieving the three goals outlined in OPM's strategic government-wide workforce plan for the federal veterinary workforce, primarily through their participation in TMAC. However, in each of the three goals, TMAC did not follow through on next steps and made limited progress in achieving its goals in part because the group did not consistently monitor and evaluate its progress toward achieving the goals.

TMAC's efforts in each of its three goals were as follows:

- **Obtain a comprehensive understanding of the federal veterinary workforce.** TMAC's primary effort toward this goal was a government-wide survey of federal veterinarians administered in June 2012. The survey—the first of its kind for federal veterinarians, according to the TMAC report on the survey—was an effort to collect standardized data on the veterinarians employed at 13 federal agencies, including information on their education and certifications, their emergency response skills, and the challenges agencies face in recruiting and retaining them. The survey was intended to serve as a starting point for identifying workforce issues and opportunities to collaborate across agency lines. However, several factors limit the reliability and relevance of the survey results. In particular, officials who conducted the survey said they no longer retained any documentation about their methodology; therefore, we could not evaluate the reliability of its results. Also, according to the survey report, 69 percent of federal veterinarians did not respond to the survey, and TMAC did not assess the potential for nonresponse bias, thereby reducing TMAC's ability to draw reliable conclusions about the workforce as a whole.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the survey did not address the unique workforce planning needs of individual agencies, such as component agencies within USDA and HHS. For example, the survey identified recruitment and retention challenges for departments as a whole and did not identify particular challenges or strategies to address the challenges confronting component agencies, such as FSIS, which has faced a shortage in veterinarian positions at slaughter plants. Finally, as of February 2015, TMAC had not followed through on next steps identified in the survey report, such as obtaining

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<sup>22</sup>Nonresponse bias appears in survey results that do not accurately reflect the population. It might occur due to under- or overrepresentation of some respondents' views on survey questions. For example, some types of veterinarians or veterinarians at certain agencies may be under- or overrepresented in the responses.

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data from senior agency leaders to validate the results of the assessment. Without following through on such steps, OPM and federal agencies will not know whether there are issues to be resolved, where they exist, and how government-wide approaches can be developed to resolve them.

- **Improve recruiting and retention results for the federal veterinary workforce.** OPM's strategic plan identified several recruitment and retention challenges, such as a limited number of veterinary school graduates and competition for graduates from the private sector. To address this challenge, TMAC considered marketing efforts, such as using social media, to attract veterinary students and others to consider careers in the federal government and discussed strategies for improving recruitment and retention. TMAC did not follow through on these discussions, however, by identifying the agencies using these strategies or evaluating their success. Another initiative to boost federal recruiting efforts, government-wide direct-hire authority for veterinarians, has not been sufficiently monitored or evaluated to determine its effectiveness. In its February 2009 memo approving the authority, OPM cited various factors as justification for the authority, including a severe shortage of candidates despite agencies' use of other recruitment initiatives, such as recruiting at veterinary colleges. The memo also stated that OPM would monitor use of the direct-hire authority, as well as the continued need for it, and that OPM would modify or terminate the authority as appropriate. Without a review of the use of the authority, OPM cannot determine the overall impact on recruitment or whether the authority should continue or be modified if shortages are limited to some agencies, as TMAC reported. For example, an APHIS official told us that the agency uses direct-hire authority to facilitate the hiring process, not because the agency faces a shortage of applicants, suggesting that OPM could modify the direct-hire authority by limiting it to agencies that face shortages. Otherwise, standard federal hiring requirements can be circumvented without just cause.
- **Enhance efforts to identify the veterinary workforce needed during emergency events.** TMAC's primary effort toward this goal was the study to determine the veterinarian workforce needed to respond to an animal disease outbreak. As we discussed above, the study's estimates of the number of veterinarians needed are not reliable for purposes of effective emergency response planning because of several limitations, such as being based on a model that had not been verified or validated. In addition, according to the TMAC report on the study, an emergency response will require veterinarians

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with varying skills, experience, and specialty training, but TMAC did not follow through to identify the response needed by each veterinary specialty, which the report had identified as an important next step. As another step toward this goal, TMAC's government-wide survey of federal veterinarians included questions on federal veterinarians' capability and willingness to respond to an emergency and their related experience and training. The report on the survey included a list of training needs; in a related effort, DHS initiated a project to create an online training framework for animal agriculture emergency responders, which is mainly aimed for the use of state officials.

A key reason that OPM and federal agencies have taken limited steps to achieve these goals is that they did not consistently monitor and evaluate progress toward achieving the goals. One of our key principles for effective strategic workforce planning is monitoring and evaluating progress toward human capital goals.<sup>23</sup> Periodic measurement of progress toward human capital goals provides information for effective oversight by identifying performance shortfalls and appropriate corrective actions. According to OPM officials, the group did not consistently monitor progress toward goals in part because the group's membership did not have sufficient leadership support from participating agencies. Monitoring and evaluating the group's efforts could better position OPM to ensure progress is being made or assist it in determining appropriate actions to take if progress is limited.

At a TMAC meeting in May 2014, OPM initiated the process of setting new goals but has not yet obtained agency leadership support for these goals. For example, one of the goals discussed at the meeting was to develop a way to identify all federal veterinarians, regardless of the positions they occupy.<sup>24</sup> In particular, OPM proposed adding a data element to its classification system to be able to identify all veterinarians, regardless of their occupation—a time-consuming process that would

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<sup>23</sup>GAO-04-39.

<sup>24</sup>Currently, the OPM system for classification of federal employees allows for identification of veterinarians in the veterinary medical science series (i.e., veterinarians in the 0701 occupational series), but not of veterinarians who fill other types of positions, such as managerial or interdisciplinary positions that are open to but not required to be filled by veterinarians. As a result, OPM and federal agencies cannot easily identify all federal veterinarians.



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require agencies to retroactively identify the veterinarians they employ outside of the veterinary medical science series.

In a September 2014 TMAC meeting we observed, TMAC members recognized a need for a higher level of leadership and agreed on a plan to form an executive steering committee. The committee would include a senior executive with veterinary subject-matter expertise from a participating agency's program office, as well as a human capital officer. As of March 2015, TMAC members had not yet identified agency officials to serve in this leadership capacity. OPM officials said that, given that USDA, and to a lesser extent HHS, employ most civilian veterinarians, the leadership support for TMAC should come from these departments. Leadership involvement is among the key principles we have identified for effective strategic workforce planning, and we have also found that leadership involvement facilitates collaboration within interagency groups.<sup>25</sup> Without leadership support from USDA and HHS, TMAC will likely continue to have difficulty ensuring progress toward group goals, such as developing a way to identify all federal veterinarians.

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## Conclusions

USDA has taken steps to provide department-wide guidance and evaluation of its agencies' veterinarian workforce planning; APHIS and FSIS in particular considered veterinarians as part of their workforce planning efforts for routine activities. However, HHS has not made similar efforts or conducted a department-wide assessment. In 2009, we recommended that HHS conduct department-wide assessments of their veterinarian workforces based on workforce assessments by their component agencies. Among the HHS component agencies, only FDA developed a strategic workforce plan that considered veterinarians. Department-wide guidance and evaluation and collaboration among all of the department's affected agencies, including individual centers, institutes, and offices within CDC and NIH that conduct workforce planning for veterinarians, could better position HHS to integrate its component agencies' workforce planning efforts, including efforts to identify and address any gaps in its veterinarian workforce. Accordingly, we continue to believe that our previous recommendation remains valid.

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<sup>25</sup>GAO, *Managing for Results: Implementation Approaches Used to Enhance Collaboration in Interagency Groups*, GAO-14-220 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 14, 2014).

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APHIS—the lead agency at USDA for an emergency response to an animal disease outbreak—has made a limited effort to estimate the number of veterinarians needed to respond to a large-scale outbreak. As a result, APHIS does not know whether the number of veterinarians currently available to respond is sufficient. Consequently, it does not know if it needs to place a higher priority on increasing the number of veterinarians available to assist in an emergency response—for example, by resuming the processing of applications for veterinarians who can volunteer to serve as temporary federal employees. In addition, APHIS has not fully assessed the sources it can rely on in an emergency or how to train this supplemental veterinarian workforce to be effective in an animal disease outbreak. Without these assessments, APHIS may be limited in its ability to mount an effective emergency response to an animal disease outbreak, with potentially serious consequences for the nation’s agriculture sector.

OPM and other federal agencies that participate in TMAC have taken steps toward OPM’s government-wide goals for veterinarians—a relatively small but important population of the federal workforce that is spread among multiple agencies. However, without consistent monitoring and evaluation of the group’s efforts, TMAC’s efforts to follow OPM’s 2010 government-wide strategic workforce plan for veterinarians have fallen short of OPM’s goals. For example, the veterinarian workforce assessment spearheaded by TMAC in 2012 was not detailed or rigorous enough to answer basic questions about the specific challenges agencies face, and TMAC did not follow through on next steps it identified, such as obtaining data from senior agency leaders to validate the results of the assessment. Similarly, in the absence of consistent monitoring and evaluation, OPM and other federal agencies may not be appropriately targeting their efforts, such as with government-wide direct-hire authority for veterinarians that OPM granted in 2009. In particular, since granting the authority, OPM has not evaluated how agencies are using it, and whether its continuation is warranted. Without leadership support from TMAC members—including USDA and HHS, the major federal employers of civilian veterinarians—OPM may have difficulty ensuring progress toward TMAC goals and taking appropriate actions if progress is limited.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making three recommendations to improve the ability of the federal veterinarian workforce to carry out its activities.

To prepare for an emergency involving a large-scale animal disease outbreak, we recommend that the Secretary of Agriculture direct the

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Administrator of APHIS to assess the veterinarian workforce needs under possible scenarios for an emergency response to a large-scale animal disease outbreak. Building on TMAC's efforts to determine the veterinarian workforce needed to respond to an animal disease outbreak, the assessment should include the number and types of veterinarians needed, the sources required to have a sufficient workforce to respond, and the training needed to carry out their roles.

To improve government-wide veterinarian workforce planning efforts, we recommend that the Director of the Office of Personnel Management

- initiate efforts to monitor and evaluate TMAC's progress toward government-wide goals for the federal veterinary workforce and work with TMAC members to obtain leadership support, particularly from USDA and HHS, for making progress toward the goals; and
- evaluate whether the need for government-wide direct-hire authority for veterinarians continues to exist and modify or terminate the authority as appropriate.

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## Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to USDA, OPM, HHS and DHS for their review and comment. USDA and OPM provided written comments, which appear in appendixes II and III, respectively. DHS and HHS provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

USDA partially agreed with our recommendation about having APHIS assess the veterinarian workforce needs under possible scenarios for an emergency response to a large-scale animal disease outbreak. In particular, USDA agreed that APHIS could do more to improve its estimates of veterinarian workforce needs for an emergency response to an animal disease outbreak, but believes that it has made efforts to assess its needs. For example, USDA stated that APHIS follows National Response Framework principles in planning for animal disease emergencies and described efforts APHIS has made to assess its veterinarian workforce needs for an emergency response. According to USDA, these efforts include using insights from real-world outbreaks to improve planning models for an emergency response and developing response strategies that can alter veterinarian workforce needs during a disease outbreak, such as use of vaccines or quarantine.

We recognize that the efforts described by USDA are an important part of response planning under the National Response Framework. However, USDA did not provide documentation to demonstrate that it had assessed

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its veterinarian workforce needs for an emergency response. Moreover, as stated in our report, APHIS officials told us that the agency had not developed estimates of the number of veterinarians needed for an emergency response, other than one modeling effort for a TMAC study. APHIS officials explained that the agency considered other aspects of planning for an outbreak, such as ensuring the right incident command is in place, to be a higher priority. As a result, we believe that our work fairly and accurately describes what is known about the extent of the APHIS efforts and what needs to be done. Reliable estimates of the veterinarians needed for an emergency, combined with other aspects of planning for an outbreak, will help APHIS to be prepared to have a sufficient number of veterinarians to respond to the most serious animal disease outbreaks.

OPM agreed with our recommendation about initiating efforts to monitor and evaluate TMAC's progress toward government-wide goals for the federal veterinary workforce and working with TMAC members to obtain leadership support, particularly from USDA and HHS. OPM stated that it designed and will aid in establishing a Veterinary Medical Officer Executive Steering Committee for TMAC to, among other things, provide leadership and ensure progress toward stated goals.

OPM also agreed to evaluate whether the need for government-wide direct-hire authority for veterinarians continues to exist. OPM further stated that it periodically reviews direct-hire authority for veterinarians, as specified under the regulation on termination, modification, and extension of direct-hire authority. Under the regulation, OPM is to review agency use of the authority on a periodic basis to ensure proper administration and to determine if continued use of the authority is supportable. To demonstrate that it has conducted such reviews, OPM provided us a list of the number of times the authority was used by various departments and agencies in recent years. However, OPM did not provide information showing whether or how it had determined that continued use of the authority is supportable. Moreover, an OPM official responsible for direct-hire authority told us in August 2014 that he was not aware of any systematic review to determine whether direct-hire authority was still needed for veterinarians. In our view, a determination that continued use of the authority is supportable requires an evaluation that includes an examination not only of the number of times the authority was used, but also of other factors, such as whether there is a severe shortage of candidates or a critical hiring need for veterinarians.

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We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretaries of Agriculture; Health and Human Services; and Homeland Security; the Director of the Office of Personnel Management; and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff members have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3841 or [neumannj@gao.gov](mailto:neumannj@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Neumann", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

John Neumann  
Director, Natural Resources and Environment

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# Appendix I: Departments, Agencies, and Other Entities That Have Participated in the Talent Management Advisory Council

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**Department of Agriculture (USDA)**

- Agricultural Research Service (ARS)
- Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)
- Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)

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**Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)**

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
- National Institutes of Health (NIH)

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**Department of Commerce**

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**Department of Defense (DOD)**

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**Department of Homeland Security (DHS)**

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**Department of the Interior**

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**Department of Veterans Affairs**

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**Environmental Protection Agency**

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**Office of Personnel Management (OPM)**

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**Smithsonian Institution<sup>a</sup>**

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**Nonfederal entities**

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**American Veterinary Medical Association**

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**Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges**

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**National Association of Federal Veterinarians**

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Source: OPM. | GAO-15-495

<sup>a</sup>The Smithsonian is a trust entity of the United States with most funds coming from federal appropriations.

Note: Most departments have one representative; USDA and HHS have several agency representatives also. The three nonfederal entities can attend meetings and provide comments but do not participate in votes.

# Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Agriculture



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the  
Assistant Secretary  
for Administration

Office of  
Human Resources  
Management

1400 Independence  
Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC  
20250-9600

Mr. John Neumann  
Director, Natural Resources and Environment  
Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

MAY 14 2015

Dear Mr. Neumann:

Thank you for providing the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) the opportunity to comment on the Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report titled, "FEDERAL VETERINARIANS: Efforts Needed to Improve Workforce Planning (GAO-15-495)." We appreciate the opportunity to provide you with comments about this report.

#### GAO Recommendation

To prepare for an emergency involving a large-scale animal disease outbreak, we recommend that the Secretary of Agriculture direct the Administrator of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to assess the veterinarian workforce needs under possible scenarios for an emergency response to a large-scale animal disease outbreak. Building on the Talent Management Advisory Council's (TMAC) efforts to determine the veterinarian workforce needed to respond to an animal disease outbreak, the assessment should include the number and types of veterinarians needed, the sources required to have a sufficient workforce to respond, and the training needed to carry out their roles.

#### USDA Response

USDA agrees, in part, with the GAO recommendation. Although APHIS already regularly assesses its veterinarian needs as part of its overall workforce planning processes, as well as follows National Response Framework principles in planning for animal disease emergencies, additional work could be done to improve APHIS' estimates. APHIS is committed to improving its planning tools with respect to veterinarian workforce estimates for animal disease outbreaks at different disease thresholds. APHIS has learned that some of the best information to improve workforce planning models comes from real-world outbreaks. For example, the current Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) outbreak is producing new challenges that will be incorporated into our response planning. The outbreak strategies and disease vectors currently employed for HPAI, and those employed during our response to Exotic Newcastle Disease, have provided useful insight into veterinarian adjustments for disease response. Specifically, this has caused APHIS to adjust its models to scale operations based on need and available veterinarian resources. In addition to improving planning models for veterinary workforce requirements, APHIS is also continuing to

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develop useful options involving vaccines, quarantine, and movement restrictions which can alter veterinarian workforce needs during an outbreak. APHIS' goal is to shape a comprehensive response strategy that will meet the requirements of a disease outbreak. Our workforce planning efforts will incorporate "lessons learned" and other considerations to improve our response planning and related training needs.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and respond to the GAO draft report.

Best regards,



William P. Milton, Jr.  
Chief Human Capital Officer  
Office of Human Resources Management



# Appendix III: Comments from the Office of Personnel Management



UNITED STATES OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT  
Washington, DC 20415

Employee Services

MAY 13 2015

John Neumann  
Director, Natural Resources and Environment  
Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Neumann:

Thank you for providing the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) the opportunity to comment on the Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report entitled, "FEDERAL VETERINARIANS: Efforts Needed to Improve Workforce Planning (GAO-15-495)." We appreciate the opportunity to provide you with comments about this report.

### Summary of OPM Position

We have reviewed your draft audit report entitled, "FEDERAL VETERINARIANS: Efforts Needed to Improve Workforce Planning" and we are in concurrence with the findings and recommendations. We recognize that even the most well run programs can benefit from an external evaluation and we appreciate GAO's input as we continue to work to enhance our workforce planning efforts within the Federal Veterinarian Medical Officers corps. Specific responses to your recommendations are provided below.

### Response to Recommendations

**FINDING 1:** OPM and other federal agencies have taken steps toward achieving the three goals outlined in OPM's strategic government-wide workforce plan for the federal veterinary workforce, primarily through their participation in the Talent Management Advisory Council (TMAC). However, in each of the three goals, TMAC did not follow through on next steps and made limited progress in achieving its goals in part because the group did not consistently monitor and evaluate its progress toward achieving the goals. GAO noted on page 25 of the report: "FEDERAL VETERINARIANS: Efforts Needed to Improve Workforce Planning," that "Without leadership support from TMAC members--including USDA and HHS, the major federal employers of civilian veterinarians--OPM may have difficulty ensuring progress toward TMAC goals and taking appropriate actions if progress is limited."

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** To improve government-wide veterinary workforce planning efforts, we recommend that the Director of the Office of Personnel Management incorporate efforts to monitor and evaluate the Talent Management Advisory Committee's (TMAC) progress towards government-wide goals for the federal veterinary workforce and work with TMAC members to obtain leadership support, particularly from USDA and HHS, for making progress towards goals.

[www.opm.gov](http://www.opm.gov)

Recruit, Retain and Honor a World-Class Workforce to Serve the American People

[www.usajobs.gov](http://www.usajobs.gov)

**OPM RESPONSE 1: Concur**

OPM agrees with the necessity to both monitor and evaluate progress toward meeting government-wide goals, and to solicit and ensure leadership involvement to institutionalize those goals. We have designed and will aid in establishing a Veterinary Medical Officer (VMO) Executive Steering Committee (ESC).

The ESC's role will be to:

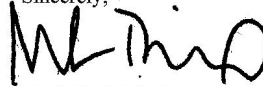
- provide leadership regarding the direction of the strategic management of workforce decisions regarding the VMO corps;
- facilitate action planning between the human capital and programmatic components of the TMAC to ensure coordination between these inter-dependent groups;
- support VMO agencies in designing strategies to close skills gaps while developing mitigation strategies that enhance the VMO's capabilities for responding to pandemics and emergencies; and
- ensure that progress toward stated goals are monitored, evaluated and modified as needed.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** To improve the government-wide veterinarian workforce planning efforts, we recommend that the Director of the Office of Personnel Management evaluate whether the need for government-wide direct-hire authority for veterinarians continues to exist and modify or terminate the authority as appropriate.

**OPM RESPONSE 2: Concur**

OPM concurs with the recommendation to evaluate whether the need for government-wide direct-hire authority (DHA) for veterinarians continues to exist. OPM periodically checks and re-evaluates the appropriateness of the DHA in compliance with 5 CFR 337, Subpart B. OPM is committed to its continued compliance with the regulation, and, accordingly, believes that sufficient oversight and criteria are already in place to satisfy this recommendation.

Sincerely,



Mark D. Reinhold  
Associate Director, Employee Services  
and Chief Human Capital Officer

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# Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

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