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Comptroller General
of the United States

Accessible Version

June 6, 2024

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Priority Open Recommendations: Department of Agriculture

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

The purpose of this letter is to provide an update on the overall status of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) implementation of GAO's recommendations and to call your continued personal attention to areas where open recommendations should be given high priority.¹ In November 2023, we reported that, on a government-wide basis, 75 percent of our recommendations made 4 years ago were implemented.² USDA's recommendation implementation rate was 82 percent. As of May 2024, USDA had 109 open recommendations. Fully implementing these open recommendations could significantly improve agency operations.

I appreciate your leadership and commitment to strengthening USDA's efforts to implement our recommendations, including the continued use of a working group to address priority and other open recommendations. Since our May 2023 letter, USDA has implemented five of our 12 open priority recommendations.

- In October 2023, USDA provided updated policies and procedures that address coordination between cybersecurity risk management and enterprise risk management functions, as we recommended in July 2019.³ Specifically, the updated policies and procedures describe USDA's enterprise risk management program, including the elevation of cybersecurity risks, which involves every USDA mission area and staff office. By taking these steps, USDA is better positioned to address significant cybersecurity risks in the context of other risks, and their potential impacts on the mission of the agency.

¹Priority recommendations are those that GAO believes warrant priority attention from heads of key departments or agencies. They are highlighted because, upon implementation, they may significantly improve government operations, for example, by realizing large dollar savings; eliminating mismanagement, fraud, and abuse; or making progress toward addressing a high-risk or duplication issue.

²GAO, *Performance and Accountability Report: Fiscal Year 2023*, [GAO-24-900483](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2023).

³GAO, *Cybersecurity: Agencies Need to Fully Establish Risk Management Programs and Address Challenges*, [GAO-19-384](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 25, 2019).

- In July 2023, USDA updated procedures for its risk management process that specify the roles of the senior agency official for privacy and other officials in key risk management steps, as we recommended in September 2022.⁴ Such steps include approving security categorizations for systems that contain personally identifiable information, overseeing privacy control assessments, and reviewing system authorization packages. As a result, USDA is better able to ensure privacy protections are adequately incorporated into systems with personally identifiable information.
- In July 2023, USDA's Farm Service Agency strengthened its process to help prevent payments to participants whose incomes exceed eligibility limits for farm and conservation programs, as we recommended in August 2013.⁵ By taking these steps, USDA is providing a consistent process to help prevent improper payments.
- In April 2024, USDA's Farm Service Agency initiated efforts to implement a more complete risk-based approach in selecting samples for future compliance reviews of supplemental assistance programs, as we recommended in January 2022.⁶ This included the creation of an Internal Controls Taskforce. As a result, USDA can better identify and assess risk characteristics that may include payment eligibility and program eligibility.
- In December 2023, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service developed and documented more formal project management guidance for agency staff, as we recommended in December 2022. This included a template for a project charter that officials said would be used for the next Thrifty Food Plan reevaluation. By taking these steps, the Food and Nutrition Service will be better equipped to manage projects agency-wide.

We ask that you direct your continued attention to the remaining seven priority recommendations. We are adding two new recommendations related to improving data sharing about foreign investments in U.S. agricultural land and enhancing preparedness for emerging zoonotic diseases. This brings the total number of priority recommendations to nine. (See the Enclosure for the list of recommendations.)

The nine priority recommendations fall into the following six areas.

Reducing improper payments. Reducing the total \$236 billion in reported government-wide improper payments for fiscal year 2023 is key to saving taxpayer money. Our priority recommendation in this area calls for the Farm Service Agency to conduct additional spot checks of Coronavirus Food Assistance Program payments. This program was one of the largest pandemic assistance programs, totaling \$31 billion in assistance. Our recommendation also calls for the Farm Service Agency to use a more risk-based approach for selecting additional agricultural producers (e.g., farmers and ranchers) to review for payment eligibility. Implementing this recommendation would help USDA better ensure the integrity of billions of dollars in payments under the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program.

⁴GAO, *Privacy: Dedicated Leadership Can Improve Programs and Address Challenges*, [GAO-22-105065](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 22, 2022).

⁵GAO, *Farm Programs: Additional Steps Needed to Help Prevent Payments to Participants Whose Incomes Exceed Limits*, [GAO-13-741](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 29, 2013).

⁶GAO, *USDA Market Facilitation Program: Oversight of Future Supplemental Assistance to Farmers Could Be Improved*, [GAO-22-104259](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 4, 2022).

Improving USDA’s oversight of federal assistance programs. Improving oversight of federal programs is crucial for ensuring that agencies effectively distribute billions of dollars in federal aid. We identified two priority recommendations in this area. The first calls for USDA to establish specific quality assurance guidelines for a key process associated with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, its largest nutrition assistance program. Implementing this recommendation would improve the quality and transparency of USDA’s process for determining the maximum amount of benefits that low-income households receive through the program.

The second priority recommendation calls for USDA to reduce fluctuations in subsidies for crop insurance. Implementing this recommendation would improve how USDA administers crop insurance for farmers by reducing the effects of changes in premiums caused by changes in crop prices or other factors. As a sector risk management agency for food and agriculture, we urge USDA to implement these two priority recommendations related to providing federal assistance.

Improving IT and cybersecurity. The food and agriculture sector is part of our nation’s critical infrastructure that provides essential services that underpin American society. We identified three priority recommendations in this area. The first calls for USDA to develop an IT strategic plan for the Farm Production and Conservation mission area that is in alignment with departmental policies and procedures and includes relevant performance goals and measures. The second calls for USDA to monitor IT program performance within the Farm Production and Conservation mission area against the efficiency goals and measures documented in the strategic plan. Implementing these recommendations would help USDA to maximize efficiencies and reduce IT duplication and overlap.

The third priority recommendation calls for USDA to consult with sector partners to develop methods for determining the level and type of cybersecurity framework adoption by entities across their respective sectors. Implementing this recommendation would help USDA gain a more comprehensive understanding of the framework’s use and support efforts to protect the nation’s critical infrastructure.

Managing federal fiscal exposure to climate risks. Climate change will negatively affect crop and livestock production in some regions, according to the U.S. Global Change Research Program.⁷ Our priority recommendation in this area calls for USDA to analyze options to enhance the climate resilience of U.S. agricultural producers. Implementing our recommendation would enable USDA to integrate measures, as appropriate, into USDA’s future climate resilience prioritization and planning efforts. The effects of climate risks on agriculture have implications for food security across the nation, so we urge USDA, as a sector risk management agency for food and agriculture, to implement our priority recommendation in this area.

Improving data sharing about foreign investments in U.S. agricultural land. USDA estimated that foreign investments in U.S. agricultural land—which includes farmland, pastures, and forest land—grew to approximately 43 million acres in 2022. Land purchased near U.S.

⁷U.S. Global Change Research Program, *Agriculture, Food Systems, and Rural Communities: Fifth National Climate Assessment*, Chapter 11 (Washington, D.C.: November 2023).

military bases or land purchases that could lead to foreign control of U.S. food supply chains may have national security implications.

Our priority recommendation in this area calls for USDA to analyze its ability to meet the requirements of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, within its expected budget, to create an online submission system and public database for the purpose of providing reliable information about where and how much U.S. agricultural land foreign persons hold.⁸ Taking this action would provide more timely and reliable information to key agencies, including the Department of Defense and the Department of the Treasury, and assist in efforts to identify foreign investments in agricultural land that may pose national security risks. By fully implementing this recommendation, USDA would also help Congress better understand the extent to which USDA is on track to meet the act's requirements, or if additional legislative action is needed.

Enhancing preparedness for emerging zoonotic diseases. Major outbreaks of zoonotic diseases—those caused by pathogens that spread between animals and humans, such as coronaviruses and avian influenza viruses—have caused millions of human deaths and cost billions of dollars. Our priority recommendation in this area calls for better coordination and collaboration to develop and implement a national wildlife disease surveillance system. Implementing our recommendation would enable USDA to better support early detection of zoonotic disease outbreaks and enhance preparedness for emerging zoonotic diseases.

As the auditor of the consolidated financial statements of the U.S. government, I have noticed that the USDA received a qualified audit opinion on its fiscal year 2023 financial statements related to the recognition of certain budget obligations for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits. These limitations on the audit opinion and underlying internal control weaknesses, as well as related auditor recommendations, are important issues. I encourage you to address them.

In April 2023, we issued our biennial update to our [High-Risk List](#).⁹ This list identifies government operations with greater vulnerabilities to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement. It also identifies the need for transformation to address economy, efficiency, or effectiveness challenges. Two of our high-risk areas—[improving federal oversight of food safety](#) and [limiting the federal government's fiscal exposure by better managing climate change risks](#)—focus, in part, on USDA operations.

Several other government-wide, high-risk areas also have direct implications for USDA and its operations. These areas include (1) [improving the management of IT acquisitions and operations](#), (2) [strategic human capital management](#), (3) [managing federal real property](#), (4) [ensuring the cybersecurity of the nation](#), and (5) [government-wide personnel security clearance process](#).

In addition to USDA's high-risk areas, we urge your continued attention to the other government-wide, high-risk issues as they relate to USDA. Progress on high-risk issues has been possible through the concerted actions and efforts of Congress, the Office of Management

⁸Pub. L. No. 117-328, div. A, tit. VII, § 773, 136 Stat. 4459, 4509 (2022).

⁹GAO, *High-Risk Series: Efforts Made to Achieve Progress Need to be Maintained and Expanded to Fully Address All Areas*, [GAO-23-106203](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 20, 2023).

and Budget (OMB), and the leadership and staff in agencies, including within USDA. In March 2022, we issued a report on key practices to successfully address high-risk areas, which can be a helpful resource as your agency continues to make progress to address high-risk issues.¹⁰

We also recognize the key role Congress plays in providing oversight and maintaining focus on our recommendations to ensure they are implemented and produce their desired results. Legislation enacted in December 2022 included a provision for GAO to identify any additional congressional oversight actions that can help agencies implement priority recommendations and address any underlying issues relating to such implementation.¹¹

Congress can use various strategies to address our recommendations, such as incorporating them into legislation. Congress can also use its budget, appropriations, and oversight processes to incentivize executive branch agencies to act on our recommendations and monitor their progress. For example, Congress can hold hearings focused on USDA's progress in implementing GAO's priority recommendations, withhold funds when appropriate, or take other actions to provide incentives for agencies to act. Moreover, Congress could follow up during the appropriations process and request periodic updates.

Congress also plays a key role in addressing any underlying issues related to the implementation of these recommendations. For example, Congress could pass legislation providing an agency explicit authority to implement a recommendation or requiring an agency to take certain actions to implement a recommendation.

Copies of this report are being sent to the Director of OMB and the appropriate congressional committees. In addition, the report will be available on the GAO website at [Priority Open Recommendation Letters | U.S. GAO](#).

I appreciate USDA's continued commitment to these important issues. If you have any questions or would like to discuss any of the issues outlined in this letter, please do not hesitate to contact me or Mark Gaffigan, Managing Director, Natural Resources and Environment, at 202-512-3841 or gaffiganm@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Our teams will continue to coordinate with your staff on all 109 open recommendations, as well as those additional recommendations in the high-risk areas for which USDA has a leading role. Thank you for your attention to these matters.

Sincerely,

¹⁰GAO, *High-Risk Series: Key Practices to Successfully Address High-Risk Areas and Remove Them from the List*, [GAO-22-105184](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 3, 2022).

¹¹James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, Pub. L. No. 117-263, § 7211(a)(2), 136 Stat. 2395, 3668 (2022); H.R. Rep. No. 117-389 (2022) (accompanying Legislative Branch Appropriations Act, H.R. 8237, 117th Cong. (2022)).



Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
of the United States

Enclosure

cc: The Honorable Xochitl Torres Small, Deputy Secretary, USDA
The Honorable Lynn Moaney, Deputy Chief Financial Officer, USDA
The Honorable Marcia Bunger, Administrator, Risk Management Agency
The Honorable Zach Ducheneaux, Administrator, Farm Service Agency
The Honorable Gloria Montaño Greene, Deputy Under Secretary, Farm Production and Conservation
The Honorable Cindy Long, Administrator, Food and Nutrition Service
The Honorable Seth Meyer, Chief Economist
The Honorable Shalanda Young, Director, Office of Management and Budget
The Honorable Michael Watson, Administrator, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

Enclosure

Priority Open Recommendations to the U.S. Department of Agriculture

Reducing Improper Payments

Coronavirus Food Assistance Program: USDA Should Conduct More Rigorous Reviews of Payments to Producers. [GAO-22-104397](#). Washington, D.C.: September 8, 2022.

Year Recommendation Made: 2022

Recommendation: The Administrator of the Farm Service Agency (FSA) should conduct additional spot checks of Coronavirus Food Assistance Program payments and use a more risk-based approach to selecting producers for review. This approach could include focusing on producers of commodities not generally covered by other FSA programs and producers that received large payments.

Action Needed: USDA agreed with the recommendation. Although these payments are no longer being made, our recommendation remains relevant because FSA can conduct post-payment reviews and recovery audits to identify improper payments. FSA developed a risk-based methodology to select additional producers for spot checks and directed its field offices to conduct spot checks in accordance with guidance the agency issued in July 2023.

As of April 2024, FSA county offices had completed the additional spot checks, but national-level reporting and analysis was ongoing. To fully implement this recommendation, FSA needs to complete its process for conducting the additional spot checks and ensure it uses a more risk-based approach for selecting producers for review. Using a more rigorous review process could better ensure the integrity of billions of dollars in payments.

Director: Steve D. Morris

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Improving USDA's Oversight of Federal Assistance Programs

Thrifty Food Plan: Better Planning and Accountability Could Help Ensure Quality of Future Reevaluations. [GAO-23-105450](#). Washington, D.C.: December 14, 2022.

Year Recommendation Made: 2023

Recommendation: The Secretary of Agriculture should establish specific quality assurance guidelines for Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) reevaluations that will ensure methodological decisions meet key quality standards for an analysis that will affect public policy and inform policy makers. These guidelines should summarize applicable USDA and other federal quality standards and should describe how such standards will be embedded in future TFPs. These guidelines should ensure that future TFP reports have:

- clear rationales linked to the objective and scope of the analysis;
- consideration of alternatives based in evidence, including important economic effects;

- underlying analysis of economic effects associated with decisions; and where important economic effects cannot be quantified, the analysis explains how they affect the comparison of alternatives;
- transparent description of analytical choices, assumptions, and data, including explanation of key limitations in the data and methods used; and
- adequate documentation included in the analysis; and the analysis should document that it complies with a robust quality assurance process.

Action Needed: USDA neither agreed nor disagreed with the recommendation. As of February 2024, the agency had taken some steps to address our recommendation. Specifically, USDA published an initial study plan for the 2026 TFP reevaluation that outlined several quality assurance commitments for the reevaluation, such as conducting the reevaluation in accordance with USDA's Scientific Integrity policy and analytic best practices and implementing external peer review.

However, the initial study plan did not establish specific quality assurance guidelines or controls, such as a checklist to ensure the reevaluation team is aware of, and held accountable for, key quality assurance steps and standards, as we recommended.

To implement this recommendation, USDA needs to establish specific quality assurance guidelines for TFP reevaluations. Doing so will help USDA ensure the quality and transparency of future TFP reevaluations, which determine the maximum amount of benefits that millions of low-income households receive through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Director: Kathryn Larin

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Crop Insurance: Opportunities Exist to Improve Program Delivery and Reduce Costs. [GAO-17-501](#). Washington, D.C.: July 26, 2017.

Year Recommendation Made: 2017

Recommendation: To reduce year-to-year fluctuations in the administrative and operating expense subsidies that companies receive at the crop, state, and county levels, the Secretary of Agriculture should direct the Administrator of the Risk Management Agency (RMA) to consider adjusting the administrative and operating expense subsidy calculation method in a way that reduces the effects of changes in premiums caused by changes in crop prices or other factors when it renegotiates the standard reinsurance agreement.

Action Needed: USDA neither agreed nor disagreed with the recommendation. As of April 2024, USDA had not taken actions to implement our recommendation. According to a USDA official, RMA will consider the recommendation after it has renegotiated its agreement with insurance companies, but the time frame for this renegotiation is not known.

To fully implement the recommendation, USDA needs to provide documentation that the department and RMA considered whether to adjust the calculation method to account for changes caused by fluctuations in crop prices and other factors. Adjusting the method would help reduce fluctuations in the subsidies that companies receive and help ensure the sustainability of the program's delivery system and services to farmers.

Director: Steve D. Morris

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Improving IT and Cybersecurity

IT Modernization: USDA Needs to Improve Oversight of Farm Production and Conservation

Mission Area. [GAO-21-512](#). Washington, D.C.: September 23, 2021.

Year Recommendations Made: 2021

Recommendations: The Secretary of Agriculture should:

- ensure that the Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) directs the Assistant Chief Information Officer to have the FPAC mission area develop a strategic plan, in alignment with departmental policies and procedures, to include performance goals and measures for maximizing efficiencies and reducing IT duplication and overlap; and
- ensure that the Under Secretary for FPAC directs the Assistant Chief Information Officer to have the FPAC mission area monitor IT program performance against efficiency goals and measures documented in its plan for maximizing efficiencies and reducing IT duplication and overlap.

Action Needed: USDA concurred with both recommendations. USDA described actions that it would take to implement both. With regard to our first recommendation, in January 2023, USDA officials stated that FPAC planned to publish a mission area IT strategic plan to include performance goals and measures for maximizing efficiencies and reducing IT duplication and overlap. According to department officials, as of February 2024, the strategic plan was in the approval process.

With regard to our second recommendation, in August 2022, USDA stated that FPAC would develop strategic performance metrics that would align with USDA's IT strategic plan and be supported by FPAC's Enterprise Architecture Repository. Specifically, USDA stated that these metrics would enable regular monitoring by FPAC IT governance to maximize efficiencies and reduce IT duplication and overlap. USDA estimated these actions would be completed by September 2022. However, as of February 2024, agency officials indicated that FPAC's IT strategic plan was in the approval process and that FPAC's use of the metrics was dependent on the plan's approval.

To fully implement our recommendations, USDA needs to (1) approve an FPAC strategic plan that includes performance goals and measures for maximizing efficiencies and reducing IT duplication and overlap; and (2) begin monitoring FPAC IT program performance against the goals and measurements established in the strategic plan. Including appropriate goals and

measures to reduce duplication and overlap in its IT strategic plan could provide further efficiencies and savings.

High-Risk Area: [Improving the Management of IT Acquisitions and Operations](#)

Director: David B. Hinchman

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Critical Infrastructure Protection: Additional Actions Are Essential for Assessing Cybersecurity Framework Adoption. [GAO-18-211](#). Washington, D.C.: February 15, 2018.

Year Recommendation Made: 2018

Recommendation: The Secretary of Agriculture, in cooperation with the Secretary of Health and Human Services, should take steps to consult with respective sector partner(s), such as the Food and Agriculture Sector Coordinating Council, Department of Homeland Security, and National Institute of Standards and Technology, as appropriate, to develop methods for determining the level and type of framework adoption by entities across their respective sector.

Action Needed: USDA neither agreed nor disagreed with the recommendation. USDA stated that it would attempt to develop a measurement mechanism as part of its annual data calls to the Food and Agriculture sector. USDA has taken steps to determine framework adoption across the sector. For example, USDA distributed several requests for information to sector members that include questions regarding framework adoption and any resulting improvements. In addition, USDA requested feedback from sector partners and made subsequent changes to its requests for information. However, as of February 2024, USDA had not yet received information from sector entities regarding their adoption of the National Institute of Standards and Technology cybersecurity framework.

To fully implement this recommendation, USDA needs to take actions that will allow the agency to better assess framework adoption among entities in the Food and Agriculture sector. For example, USDA should identify ways to leverage information that the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Homeland Security, and other sector partners have collected regarding the sector's adoption of the cybersecurity framework. Doing so would help USDA gain a comprehensive understanding of the framework's use and support efforts to protect the nation's critical infrastructure.

High-Risk Area: [Ensuring the Cybersecurity of the Nation](#)

Director: David B. Hinchman

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Managing Federal Fiscal Exposure to Climate Risks

Climate Change: Options to Enhance the Resilience of Agricultural Producers and Reduce

Federal Fiscal Exposure. [GAO-23-104557](#). Washington, D.C.: January 17, 2023.

Year Recommendation Made: 2023

Recommendation: The Secretary of Agriculture should ensure that the Climate Change Program Office, located within the Office of the Chief Economist, analyzes the options to enhance the climate resilience of agricultural producers that were identified in this report and integrates them, as appropriate, into USDA's future climate resilience prioritization and planning efforts. Such analysis should include an explanation of USDA's decision to prioritize or not prioritize the options identified in this report and the identification of any additional authority and resources that USDA would need to implement the options.

Action Needed: USDA agreed with the recommendation. In September 2023, the White House Council on Environmental Quality issued instructions for USDA to develop a 2024–2027 Climate Adaptation Plan. As of March 2024, USDA planned to address GAO's recommendation in the next cycle of its department-level climate adaptation planning and was developing a new plan for release later in 2024.

According to USDA, the new plan will include a detailed discussion of how USDA policies, programs, decision-making, and funding processes are working to consider the effects of climate change on farmers, forest landowners, and rural communities. The plan will also include a stand-alone section that directly addresses the 13 options proposed in our report. USDA plans to provide information about the extent to which it is implementing some of the 13 options, or if not addressing an option directly, how the agency is otherwise addressing the need that an option aims to meet. The release of USDA's 2024–2027 Climate Adaptation Plan will be coordinated by the Council on Environmental Quality in late spring or early summer. To implement this recommendation, USDA should ensure this plan analyzes the options to enhance the climate resilience of agricultural producers that were identified in our report.

High-Risk Area: [Limiting the Federal Government's Fiscal Exposure by Better Managing Climate Change Risks](#)

Director: Steve D. Morris

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Improving Data Sharing about Foreign Investments in U.S. Agricultural Land

Foreign Investments in U.S. Agricultural Land: Enhancing Efforts to Collect, Track, and Share Key Information Could Better Identify National Security Risks. [GAO-24-106337](#). Washington, D.C.: January 18, 2024.

Year Recommendation Made: 2024

Recommendation: The Secretary of Agriculture should direct the Chief Operating Officer of the Farm Production and Conservation Business Center and the Administrator of the Farm Service Agency to jointly complete an analysis to determine the extent to which the agency can satisfy

the requirements of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 to create an Agricultural Foreign Investment Disclosure Act (AFIDA) online submission system and public database within its expected budget. If the analysis shows that the agency would be unable to meet the requirements of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, USDA should report the results to Congress and recommend appropriate legislative changes.

Action Needed: USDA agreed with the recommendation. However, agency officials stated that it would be difficult to modernize AFIDA information technology without additional funding and indicated that the agency did not have a timeline for creating a new AFIDA online submission process. USDA put forward a request for \$1 million in funding for AFIDA, which was included in the agency's final fiscal year 2024 budget. In March 2024, USDA officials told us they were working on a plan for how to use the \$1 million in funding.

To satisfy the intent of our recommendation, USDA needs to provide additional details about its plans to meet the requirements of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, or its inability to do so. Providing such information would help Congress better understand the extent to which USDA is on track to meet the act's requirements, or if additional legislative action is needed.

Directors: Nagla'a El Hodiri, International Affairs and Trade; and Steve Morris, Natural Resources and Environment

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Enhancing Preparedness for Emerging Zoonotic Diseases

Zoonotic Diseases: Federal Actions Needed to Improve Surveillance and Better Assess Human Health Risks Posed by Wildlife. [GAO-23-105238](#). Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2023.

Year Recommendation Made: 2023

Recommendation: The Administrator of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) should more fully follow leading practices for collaboration while coordinating with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) to develop and implement a national wildlife disease surveillance system. This should include clearly defining common outcomes, involving relevant participants, and identifying resources and staffing.

Action Needed: USDA agreed with the recommendation. In April 2024, USDA officials provided documentation that APHIS was coordinating with USGS through a steering committee to develop a national wildlife disease database. In addition to APHIS and USGS, the steering committee includes additional federal agencies and participants representing state and tribal interests. The committee's charter established a goal of developing a first iteration of the database by September 30, 2026.

To fully implement this recommendation, USDA needs to identify how they will track progress toward this goal and how the steering committee will be funded and staffed. Following leading practices for collaboration could help APHIS and USGS close some of the gaps in our nation's ability to identify and address emerging wildlife and zoonotic diseases.

Directors: Steve D. Morris, Natural Resources and Environment; and Karen L. Howard, Science Technology Assessment, and Analytics

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