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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Workforce Decisions Could Benefit from Better Linkage to Missions and Use of Leading Practices

GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-14-288, a report to the Chairwoman, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

FSA, NRCS, and RD, USDA's service center agencies, interact directly with agricultural producers and rural communities through extensive field office structures. Achieving their missions depends in part on sustaining workforces with the necessary knowledge and skills. In fiscal year 2012, FSA, NRCS, and RD closed field offices and offered buyout and early retirement incentives to employees. GAO was asked to review aspects of USDA's human capital management.

This report examines: (1) how the workforces of USDA's service center agencies changed from fiscal year 2003 to fiscal year 2012, (2) the extent to which USDA's policy on supervisory ratios aligned with OPM guidance in fiscal year 2012, and (3) the extent to which USDA's service center agencies followed leading practices when closing offices and reducing staff in fiscal year 2012. GAO analyzed workforce data from OPM and USDA, reviewed documents, interviewed relevant officials, and compared leading practices with the actions agencies took to close offices and reduce staff in fiscal year 2012.

What GAO Recommends

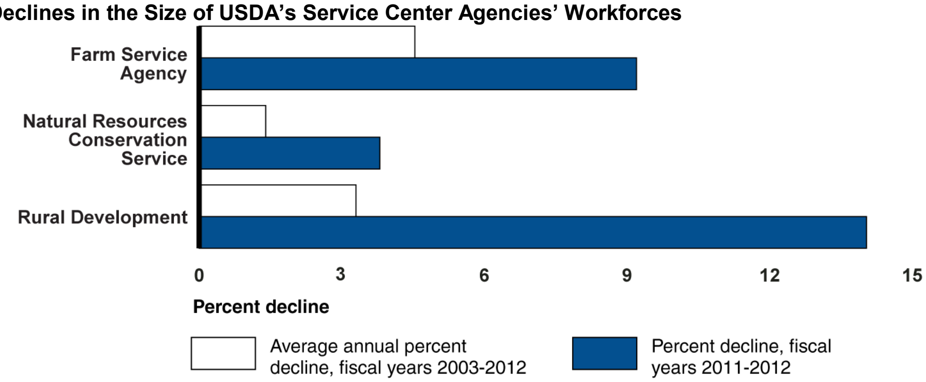
GAO recommends, among other things, that USDA take actions to revise its supervisory ratios policy; amend its policy on organizational changes to follow leading practices; and require RD and FSA to document links between various incentives and reshaping or strategic goals. USDA generally agreed with GAO's findings but disagreed with one finding and recommendation on supervisory ratios. GAO continues to believe in the need for a revised supervisory ratios policy.

View GAO-14-288. For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell at (202) 512-3841 or fennella@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

From fiscal years 2003 to 2012, the size of the workforces declined at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) service center agencies—the Farm Service Agency (FSA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and Rural Development (RD). The size of USDA's service center agencies declined by a higher percentage from fiscal years 2011 to 2012 than the average annual percent decline from fiscal years 2003 to 2012 (see fig.).

Declines in the Size of USDA's Service Center Agencies' Workforces



Sources: GAO analysis of the Office of Personnel Management and USDA data.

In fiscal year 2012, USDA policy on supervisory ratios did not align with Office of Personnel Management (OPM) guidance that states that an analytical approach can help agencies achieve the right balance of supervisory and nonsupervisory positions to support their missions. Instead, USDA's policy stated that all its agencies, regardless of their missions, should aim for a target ratio of one supervisor for at least nine employees (1:9). USDA officials were not able to provide a documented basis for this target ratio. In addition, USDA did not ensure that the service center agencies calculated their supervisory ratios the same way. As a result, USDA did not receive comparable information on supervisory ratios.

In fiscal year 2012, USDA's service center agencies generally followed or partially followed leading practices that GAO has identified when closing offices and using buyout and early retirement incentives as follows:

- In closing offices, NRCS fully followed, and FSA and RD partially followed, the practice to present a business-case or cost-benefit analysis. USDA's policy on organizational changes did not direct agencies to follow leading practices to demonstrate to stakeholders they considered information such as underlying assumptions and other alternatives.

- In using buyout and early retirement incentives, all three agencies fully followed practices to identify reshaping goals and to develop strategies that consider alternatives. However, NRCS followed, FSA partially followed, and RD did not follow the practice to link incentives to workforce reshaping or overall strategic goals. FSA and RD did not have human capital or workforce plans to clearly document how these strategies linked with broader efforts and could not show whether their remaining workforces had the right balance of skills in the right locations to support their missions.