HOMELAND SECURITY

Agriculture Inspection Program Has Made Some Improvements, but Management Challenges Persist

Why GAO Did This Study

According to DHS, invasive species cause an estimated $136 billion in lost agricultural revenue annually, and since September 11, 2001, concerns have persisted about the vulnerability of agriculture to deliberate introduction of foreign pests and disease. DHS and USDA manage the AQI program, which places agriculture inspectors at U.S. ports of entry to inspect imported agriculture products and intercept foreign pests. GAO reported in 2006 on management challenges in the program and made seven recommendations to improve it. GAO was asked to examine the extent to which (1) DHS and USDA implemented GAO's recommendations; (2) data on arrivals, inspections, and interceptions are used for managing the program; and (3) the views of AQI agriculture specialists on their work environment have changed since 2006. GAO surveyed a representative sample of agriculture specialists and supervisors; reviewed key documents and inspection procedures; visited five selected ports of entry based on size and entry pathways, such as air or sea; interviewed DHS and USDA officials; and reviewed AQI data. The survey instrument and most results can be viewed at GAO-12-884SP.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that (1) DHS and USDA develop a joint strategic plan for the AQI program, (2) DHS develop a plan for implementing a staffing model, and (3) DHS and USDA take steps to improve the reliability of certain data. DHS and USDA agreed with the recommendations.

View GAO-12-885. To view the e-supplement online, click on GAO-12-884SP. For more information, contact Lisa Shames at (202) 512-3841 or shamesl@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) have taken steps to implement all seven of the recommendations GAO made in 2006 to improve the Agriculture Quarantine Inspection (AQI) program, but they face challenges in fully implementing four of them. Specifically, DHS and USDA have implemented GAO's recommendations to improve information sharing, review DHS's financial management system for the AQI program, and remove barriers to timely and accurate transfers of AQI user fees—collected for AQI services provided in connection with the arrival of international air passengers and conveyances at U.S. ports. However, DHS and USDA face challenges in fully implementing GAO's recommendations to adopt meaningful performance measures, establish a national risk-based staffing model, improve the agriculture canine program, and revise user fees to cover program costs. For example, in 2006, GAO recommended that DHS and USDA adopt meaningful performance measures for assessing the AQI program's effectiveness at intercepting foreign pests and disease. DHS and USDA have expanded the use of one type of performance measure but have not developed measures for all aspects of the AQI program that are important for its management. In addition, the AQI program does not have a strategic plan—a leading practice that would provide DHS and USDA with a framework for defining the mission of what the program seeks to accomplish, setting goals to achieve desired results, and identifying performance measures for gauging progress toward those goals. Furthermore, DHS has undertaken efforts to respond to GAO's recommendation to develop a national, risk-based staffing model but does not yet have one, and DHS anticipates that the model will recommend significant staffing increases. DHS officials told GAO they do not have the resources to increase staff, but the agency has not developed a plan that assesses the risk of potential fiscal constraints on its ability to implement the staffing model. Without a plan or strategy to address potential resource constraints on staffing by considering the fiscal resources that may realistically be available, DHS risks increasing the vulnerability of the agriculture sector to foreign pests and disease.

The AQI program uses data on arrivals, inspections, and interceptions at U.S. ports of entry to determine how well agriculture inspections identify prohibited materials and to review ports' performance, but data quality issues may prevent AQI program officials from making full use of the data. For example, the data may not be reliable. DHS and USDA recognize that data quality is an ongoing issue and in 2004 created an interagency group to address this issue. However, from 2010 to 2011, joint DHS-USDA reviews of 22 selected ports found discrepancies in the data at about half of the ports reviewed (10 out of 22). Data reliability has the potential to affect other key efforts that are currently under way, such as the program's staffing model. Without reliable data, AQI program officials do not have assurance that they have the information needed to manage the program.

GAO also presents analysis of survey data from 2006 and 2012 on agriculture specialists' and supervisors' views about their work environment.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**