

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-168](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

USDA has identified streamlining and improving administrative services—such as budget, finance, human resources, and procurement—as a priority to cut costs and modernize operations. With budget authority estimated at \$151.5 billion in fiscal year 2015, USDA employs nearly 100,000 people organized into 18 agencies and 10 major staff offices.

GAO was asked to review USDA's efforts to streamline and improve administrative services. This report (1) describes USDA efforts to streamline and improve administrative services since 2011 and (2) examines whether opportunities exist to strengthen these efforts. GAO reviewed relevant laws, regulations, executive orders, and USDA documents. GAO also interviewed officials from the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Administration and from a nongeneralizable sample of agencies and staff offices—selected based on their missions and responsibilities—about their efforts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that USDA (1) identify and document key information to monitor all Blueprint efforts, (2) document the methodologies used for Blueprint savings estimates, (3) develop a cost-effective method to track administrative spending, and (4) maintain and promote existing tools for information-sharing. USDA stated it recognized the benefits of the recommendations but noted the associated costs also need to be considered. GAO continues to believe the recommendations are valid, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-16-168](#). For more information, contact Steve D. Morris at (202) 512-3841 or morris@gao.gov.

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USDA ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES

Streamlining Efforts Ongoing, but Actions Needed to Monitor Progress, Identify Benefits, and Share Lessons Learned

What GAO Found

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) efforts to streamline and improve administrative services began in mid-2011 and have evolved since then. Initially, USDA launched a department-wide initiative to improve administrative services and selected 27 recommendations for implementation. USDA officials said 25 of the 27 had been implemented, and 2 were in progress, as of October 2015. For example, USDA has centralized investigations of equal employment opportunity discrimination complaints and has consolidated the department's 700-plus cellular phone contracts to roughly 30. In January 2012, USDA launched a broader initiative called the Blueprint for Stronger Service (Blueprint). The Blueprint includes efforts to streamline and improve administrative and program operations. USDA is now focusing on four priority areas: workers' compensation, strategic sourcing (improving procurement and contracting), shared service centers for certain administrative services, and space utilization (improving space management of USDA-owned and leased property). In addition to department-wide Blueprint efforts, agencies and staff offices have initiated their own efforts to streamline and improve administrative services.

GAO found that there may be opportunities for USDA to strengthen the Blueprint in three areas—monitoring progress, identifying and tracking benefits, and sharing lessons learned:

- **Monitoring progress:** USDA has tracked the status of some Blueprint efforts but has not identified all of the Blueprint efforts under way or documented key information to monitor progress, such as time frames for completion and performance measures. As a result, USDA management's ability to conduct top-level reviews is limited and, therefore, USDA cannot effectively track the status of all efforts and ensure the Blueprint is fully achieving results. Federal standards for internal control call for agencies to employ control activities, such as top-level reviews of actual performance, to enforce management's directives and achieve effective results.
- **Identifying and tracking benefits:** USDA has claimed about \$1.4 billion in estimated savings from the Blueprint, including efforts to streamline and improve administrative services, but has not documented the methodologies for developing this estimate. Without such documentation, USDA cannot have reasonable assurance of the accuracy and reliability of any financial savings from its Blueprint efforts. USDA also does not track administrative spending to target Blueprint efforts to achieve savings in improving services. Reliable information on the costs of federal activities is crucial for effective management of government operations.
- **Sharing lessons learned:** USDA does not consistently maintain and promote the use of existing tools to document and share information on agencies' and offices' lessons learned from Blueprint efforts to streamline and improve administrative services. For example, other agencies could have benefitted from lessons learned from USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service's use of outside consultants. By maintaining and promoting the use of existing tools to share lessons learned, USDA could help agencies and staff offices learn from past successes and mistakes.