

## Department of Agriculture



Highlights of [GAO-03-96](#), a report to Congress included as part of GAO's Performance and Accountability Series

## Why GAO Did This Report

In its 2001 performance and accountability report on the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), GAO identified important security, modernization, food safety, food assistance, and other issues facing the department. The information GAO presents in this report is intended to help to sustain congressional attention and a departmental focus on continuing to make progress in addressing these challenges and ultimately overcoming them. This report is part of a special series of reports on governmentwide and agency-specific issues.

## What Remains to Be Done

GAO believes that USDA should

- conduct reviews of its infrastructure, equipment, and programs to identify and correct security weaknesses and
- continue to work on completing its modernization and on other challenges involving food assistance, financial management, the performance and accountability of the Forest Service, and the resolution of discrimination complaints.

GAO also believes food safety should be regulated by a single federal agency.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-96](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-96).

To view the full report, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robert A. Robinson at 202-512-3841 or at [robinsonr@gao.gov](mailto:robinsonr@gao.gov).

## What GAO Found

USDA has taken steps to address some of the specific performance and management challenges that GAO previously identified. However, a variety of challenges continue, including a significant expansion of the one involving security.

- **Ensuring adequate security.** USDA has taken actions when security problems are brought to its attention. However, it needs to be proactive in identifying and correcting an expanding array of weaknesses, such as a recently identified one involving biological agents at its laboratories as well as in correcting a long-standing one involving information security.
- **Improving the delivery of services to farmers.** USDA is progressing with its field office modernization effort to improve efficiency and customer service. However, it needs to complete this task on a number of fronts, including the automation of its application processes and the integration of field operations across its various agencies.
- **Enhancing the safety of the nation's food supply.** USDA and other federal agencies responsible for food safety have implemented an inspection program intended to enhance food safety. However, because of the millions of instances of foodborne illnesses and 5,000 related deaths that occur annually, we believe the responsibilities of USDA and other agencies for ensuring the safety of the nation's food supply need to be brought together in a single food safety agency.
- **Providing food assistance and improving program integrity.** USDA has actions underway to minimize fraud, waste, and abuse in its food assistance programs. However, it needs to reduce further the errors that occur in these programs, which, among other things, lead to significant overpayments and underpayments to benefit recipients.
- **Enhancing financial management.** USDA has achieved an unqualified opinion on its financial statements for the first time in 9 years. However, more needs to be done, especially in the Forest Service, which continues to be "high risk" due to serious financial and accounting weaknesses.
- **Improving performance accountability at the Forest Service.** The Forest Service has initiated or planned actions to address how it accounts for and reports on its operations, accomplishments, and expenditures. However, the agency has a continuing need to make significant improvements in its performance accountability.
- **Resolving discrimination complaints.** USDA has made modest progress in processing discrimination complaints. However, it has a continuing need to resolve complaints in a more timely manner.