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Committee on Homeland Security and
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VETERINARIAN WORKFORCE

The Federal Government Lacks a Comprehensive Understanding of Its Capacity to Protect Animal and Public Health

Statement of Lisa Shames, Director
Natural Resources and Environment



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Highlights of [GAO-09-424T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Veterinarians play an essential role in the defense against animal diseases, some of which can have serious repercussions for the health of animals, humans, and the economy. More than half of the federal veterinarians work in the Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and Health and Human Services (HHS). However, there is a growing national shortage of veterinarians.

This testimony focuses primarily on two key points as addressed in GAO's recently released report, *Veterinarian Workforce: Actions Are Needed to Ensure Sufficient Capacity for Protecting Public and Animal Health* ([GAO-09-178](#), February 4, 2009). First, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has not conducted a governmentwide effort to address current and future shortages of federal veterinarians; and, second, USDA and HHS have not assessed the sufficiency of their veterinarian workforces departmentwide. For the report, GAO, among other things, surveyed 24 federal component agencies about their veterinarian workforces. GAO also determined the extent to which the departments that employ about 96 percent of federal veterinarians, including USDA and HHS, have assessed the sufficiency of their veterinarian workforce. In addition, GAO interviewed officials of OPM to identify any initiatives it has conducted to address the sufficiency of the federal veterinarian workforce.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-424T](#). For more information, contact Lisa Shames at (202) 512-3841 or shamesl@gao.gov.

VETERINARIAN WORKFORCE

The Federal Government Lacks a Comprehensive Understanding of Its Capacity to Protect Animal and Public Health

What GAO Found

Although OPM's mission is to ensure the federal government has an effective civilian workforce, OPM has not conducted a governmentwide effort to address current and future federal veterinarian shortages. This is problematic because the majority of the 24 component agencies that employ veterinarians reported concerns to GAO about the sufficiency of their veterinarian workforces. For example, USDA's Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) has not been fully staffed over the past decade, and HHS' National Institutes of Health faces challenges recruiting veterinarians that specialize in laboratory animal medicine and pathology. Moreover, this situation is likely to become more challenging as a large number of federal veterinarians become eligible to retire in the near future. For example, 30 percent of USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) veterinarians will be eligible to retire by the end of fiscal year 2011.

USDA and HHS have not assessed the sufficiency of their veterinarian workforces departmentwide, despite the fact that their component agencies that employ mission-critical veterinarians are currently experiencing shortages or anticipating shortages in the future. As a result, USDA component agencies compete against one another for veterinarians instead of following a departmentwide strategy to balance the needs of these agencies. Specifically, APHIS is attracting veterinarians away from FSIS because the work at APHIS is more appealing, opportunities for advancement are greater, and the salaries are higher. Moreover, neither USDA nor HHS is fully aware of the status of its veterinarian workforce at its component agencies and, therefore, cannot strategically plan for future veterinarian needs. For example, senior HHS strategic workforce planning officials GAO spoke with were unaware of a 2007 report by one of its own Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advisory committees that found that FDA cannot fulfill its mission because of an insufficient scientific workforce, and that FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine is in a state of crisis.

To address these findings, GAO made numerous recommendations in its veterinarian workforce report. For example, GAO recommended that the Secretaries of Agriculture and Health and Human Services conduct departmentwide assessments of their veterinarian workforces to identify current and future workforce needs and departmentwide solutions to problems shared by its agencies. In addition, GAO recommended that the Director of the Office of Personnel Management determine, based on USDA's and HHS's departmentwide veterinarian workforce evaluations, whether a governmentwide effort is needed to address shortcomings in the sufficiency of the current and future veterinarian workforce.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here to discuss our report on the federal veterinarian workforce and the actions needed to ensure a sufficient capacity for protecting public and animal health, which you recently released.¹ As you know, veterinarians play a vital role in the defense against animal diseases—whether naturally or intentionally introduced—and these diseases can have serious repercussions for the health of animals, humans, and the economy. However, there is a growing shortage of veterinarians nationwide—particularly those veterinarians who care for animals raised for food, serve in rural communities, and are trained in public health. This shortage, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association, could hinder efforts to protect humans from zoonotic diseases, which are diseases that spread between animals and humans. The shortage is expected to worsen—partly as a result of space constraints at the country’s 28 veterinary colleges, which can graduate only about 2,500 students a year combined—yet the demand for veterinarians is expected to increase.

Veterinarians play a critical role in ensuring the safety of the U.S. food supply. However, the staffing levels at the Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS)—where veterinarians help ensure the safety of meat and poultry and the humane treatment of animals during slaughter—have declined since 1995 despite an increasing budget.² In addition, in 2007, we designated the federal oversight of food safety as a high-risk area of government operations because the current fragmented system has resulted in inconsistent oversight, ineffective coordination, and inefficient use of resources.³

In this context, I will focus my testimony today on two key points. First, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), whose mission is to ensure the federal government has an effective civilian workforce, has not conducted a governmentwide effort to address current and future shortages of federal veterinarians even though 16 of 24 component

¹GAO, *Veterinarian Workforce: Actions Are Needed to Ensure Sufficient Capacity for Protecting Public and Animal Health*, [GAO-09-178](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 4, 2009).

²GAO, *Humane Methods of Handling and Slaughter: Public Reporting on Violations Can Identify Enforcement Challenges and Enhance Transparency*, [GAO-08-686T](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 17, 2008).

³GAO, *High-Risk Series: An Update*, [GAO-09-271](#) (Washington, D.C.: January 2009).

agencies that employ veterinarians reported concerns about the sufficiency of their veterinarian workforce. Second, USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which together employ 68 percent of the federal veterinarian workforce, have not assessed the sufficiency of their veterinarian workforces departmentwide even though their component agencies that employ mission-critical veterinarians are currently experiencing shortages of veterinarians or anticipating shortages in the future.

My statement is based on the work we conducted for our recently released report, *Veterinarian Workforce: Actions Are Needed to Ensure Sufficient Capacity for Protecting Public and Animal Health*. Among other things, we surveyed federal departments and their component agencies employing veterinarians to determine the number, salaries, roles, and responsibilities of veterinarians, as well as any concerns these agencies had about the sufficiency of their veterinarian workforce. We then determined the extent to which the departments that employ about 96 percent of federal veterinarians, including USDA and HHS, have assessed the sufficiency of their veterinarian workforce. In addition, we interviewed OPM officials to identify any initiatives it has conducted to address the sufficiency of the federal veterinarian workforce. We conducted our work in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

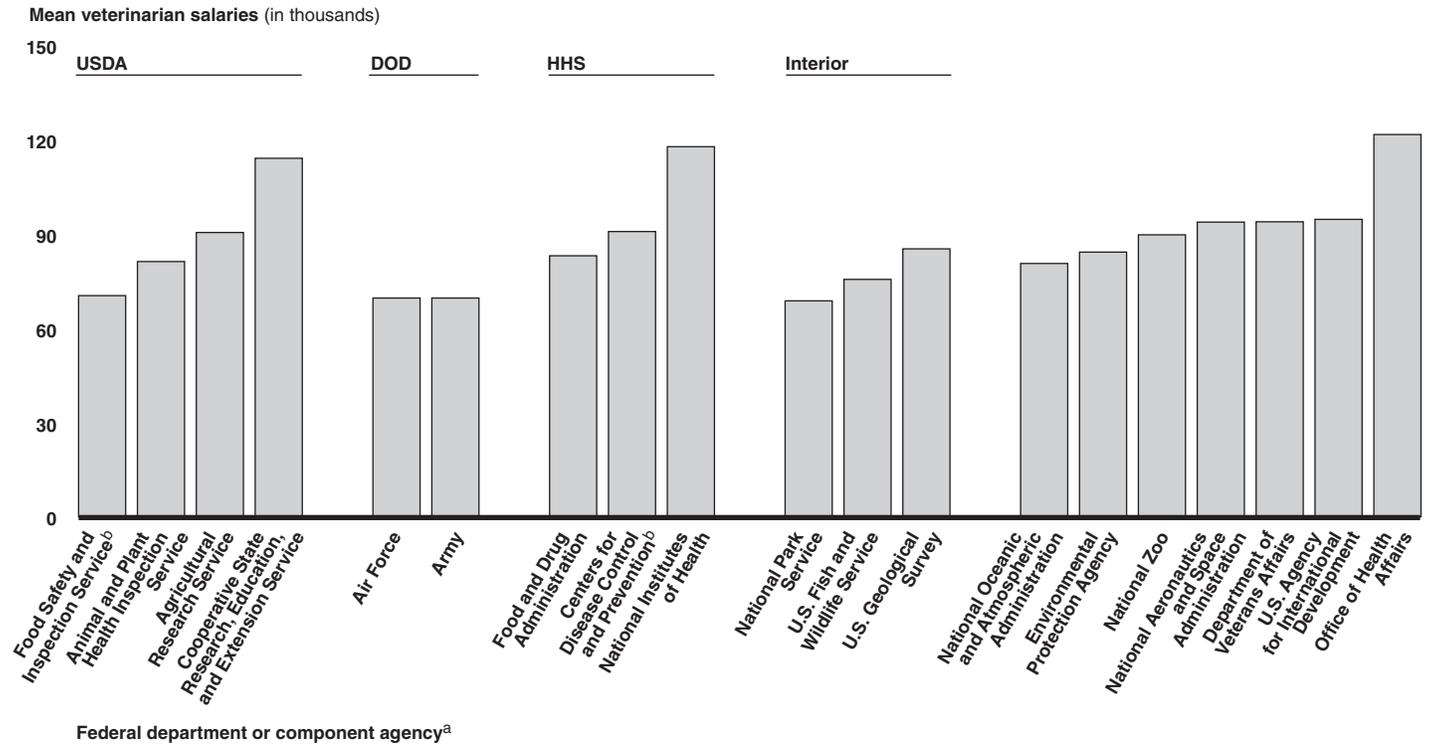
OPM Has Not Conducted a Governmentwide Effort to Address Current and Future Federal Veterinarian Shortages

OPM has not conducted a governmentwide effort to address current and future veterinarian shortages. The lack of a governmentwide initiative is problematic because the majority (67 percent) of the 24 component agencies that employ veterinarians told us they have concerns about the sufficiency of their veterinarian workforce. For example, USDA's FSIS has not been fully staffed over the past decade, and veterinarians working in its slaughter plants told us that this shortage has impaired the agency's ability to meet its food safety responsibilities. Similarly, USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) has experienced difficulty attracting and retaining veterinarians who also have a Ph.D. to conduct critical animal disease research, such as detecting avian influenza and developing vaccines against it. In addition, USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), whose veterinarians help maintain the health of the nation's livestock and poultry, has identified a potential future

shortage of veterinary pathologists. Furthermore, HHS' National Institutes of Health (NIH) faces challenges recruiting veterinarians that specialize in laboratory animal medicine and pathology. These challenges can be serious because regulations require that veterinarians be available to ensure the proper care of research animals.

Such challenges are likely to worsen as a large number of federal veterinarians become eligible to retire in the near future. For example, APHIS reported that 30 percent of its veterinarians will be eligible to retire by the end of fiscal year 2011. As the shortage grows, those federal agencies that pay veterinarians higher salaries are likely to gain a recruitment advantage. Salaries for individual veterinarians range from \$35,000 for those in the residency program at the National Zoo to \$205,000 for the highest paid veterinarian at NIH. As figure 1 illustrates, mean veterinarian base salaries vary widely across the federal government, from just under \$70,000 at the Department of the Interior's National Park Service to about \$122,000 at the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Office of Health Affairs.

Figure 1: Mean Veterinarian Base Salaries at 19 Federal Departments or Component Agencies in Fiscal Year 2008



Source: GAO analysis of agency data.

Note: Salaries do not include locality pay and stipends. In addition, we have not included mean salaries for those agencies with fewer than four veterinarians: the Departments of Energy and Justice; HHS's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response; and DHS's Directorate for National Protection and Programs. In addition, DHS's Directorate for Science and Technology was unable to provide base salary information before our veterinary workforce report was issued and, therefore, is not included.

^aWe relied on officials from these federal departments or component agencies to identify mean salaries of all veterinarians employed, including civil and military service employees, and contractors, regardless of job title. Because data are means reported by agencies, we could not assess the underlying distribution for outliers or skewness.

^bThis does not include the salaries of the United States Public Health Service Commissioned Corps veterinarians stationed at these component agencies. The Commissioned Corps is a uniformed service that belongs to HHS but fills public health leadership and service roles at several federal agencies.

Our prior work has identified the need for OPM to use its leadership position to help departments and agencies recruit and retain a capable and committed workforce.⁴ During the course of our veterinarian workforce review, OPM officials told us they would initiate a governmentwide effort to address a veterinarian shortage if the departments demonstrated that one exists. Such an effort could include allowing departments to expedite the hiring of veterinarians, as OPM has done in the past for doctors and nurses. Toward the end of our review, OPM officials told us the agency had created a team to determine whether an expedited hiring authority should be granted for all federal veterinarians and that a decision is expected in early 2009. In early 2007, OPM raised the entry grade level for newly hired veterinarians from GS-9 to GS-11.

Neither USDA nor HHS Has Assessed the Sufficiency of Its Veterinarian Workforce across Its Component Agencies

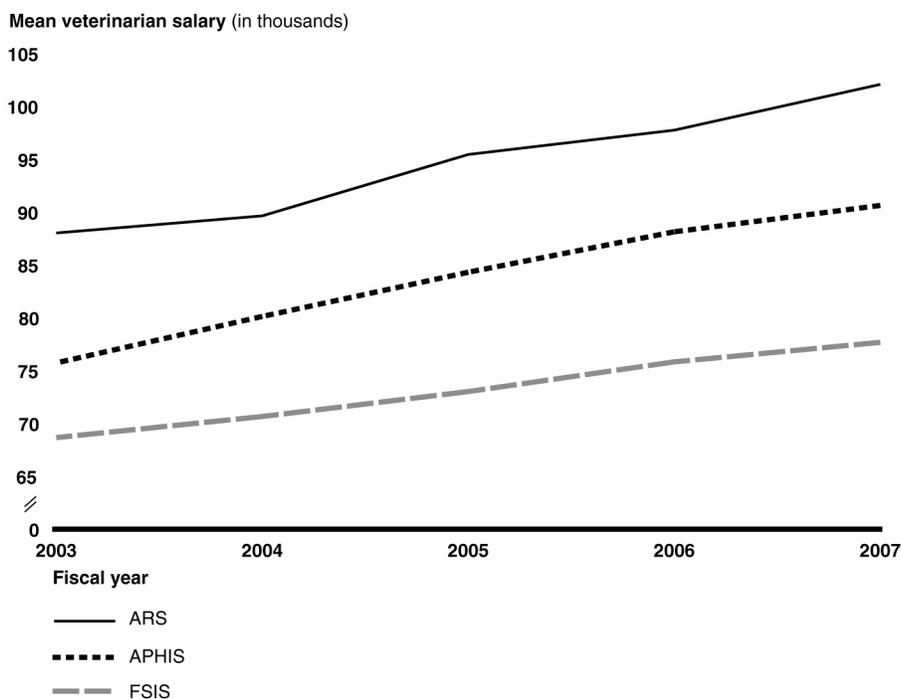
Even though all but one of their component agencies that employ mission-critical veterinarians are currently experiencing shortages of veterinarians or anticipating shortages in the future, officials from both USDA and HHS told us that they have not undertaken a departmentwide assessment of their workforces to gain a broader perspective on trends and shared issues. While USDA regularly collects veterinarian workforce data from its component agencies that employ veterinarians, it does not use this information to assess the sufficiency of the veterinarian workforce departmentwide. According to department officials, workforce assessment is the responsibility of the agencies. However, because USDA delegates this responsibility, it appears to be unaware of the scope of the workforce problems facing its agencies. For example, in its fiscal year 2007 human capital management report, USDA reported that its agencies had met or surpassed certain veterinarian workforce goals but made no mention of the shortages that FSIS and ARS identified in their workforce reports.

One result of this lack of department-level involvement is that USDA agencies compete against one another for veterinarians instead of following a departmentwide strategy to balance the needs of the agencies. According to FSIS officials, APHIS is attracting veterinarians away from FSIS because the work at APHIS is more appealing, opportunities for advancement are greater, and the salaries are higher. In fact, the mean annual salary for veterinarians at FSIS in 2007 was about \$78,000, the lowest among the three key USDA agencies (see fig. 2), whereas the mean

⁴GAO, *Human Capital: Transforming Federal Recruiting and Hiring Efforts*, [GAO-08-762T](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 8, 2008).

annual salary for APHIS was about \$91,000 that same year. According to an APHIS human resources official, the agency hired 75 veterinarians from FSIS between fiscal years 2003 and 2007, 17 percent of all new APHIS veterinarians hired.

Figure 2: Mean Veterinarian Salaries at Three Key USDA Component Agencies, Fiscal Years 2003-2007



Source: GAO analysis of Central Personnel Data File data.

Note: Data in this figure reflect locality pay.

In responding to a draft of our veterinarian workforce report, USDA said that because APHIS and FSIS employ the majority of veterinarians within the department, these component agencies will work together, with departmental consultation, as needed, to develop solutions to shared problems. We continue to believe that a departmentwide assessment is necessary.

Similarly, HHS has neither assessed veterinarian workforce needs departmentwide nor instructed any of its component agencies that employ veterinarians—Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and NIH—to assess their own workforces.

HHS is thus not fully aware of the status of the veterinarian workforce at these component agencies and cannot strategically plan for future veterinarian needs. For example, senior HHS strategic workforce planning officials we spoke with were unaware of a 2007 report by an FDA advisory committee that found that FDA cannot fulfill its mission because of an insufficient scientific workforce. More specifically, the report stated that FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine is in a state of crisis. This center employs nearly two-thirds of FDA's 152 veterinarians and is responsible for ensuring the safety of veterinary drugs and regulating animal feed, among other things.

HHS officials told us that department-level leadership in workforce planning is important. In fact, in commenting on a draft of our veterinarian workforce report, they said that all HHS operating and staff division heads are now required to have workforce plans in place for their organizations by September 2009. According to these officials, the HHS Office of Human Resources will review these plans to identify opportunities for departmentwide collaboration with regard to strategic recruitment, development, and retention.

Our work also revealed other areas in which the federal government lacks information about the sufficiency of its veterinarian workforce. For example, despite reports of insufficient veterinarian capacity during four recent disease outbreaks, many federal and state agencies have not assessed their workforce response to these outbreaks, and none of these agencies have looked across outbreaks in order to identify workforce challenges that they may have had in common. Without such understanding, the nation's veterinarian workforce may be unprepared not only for future routine outbreaks, but also for catastrophic events. In fact, we found that federal efforts to identify the veterinarian workforce that would be needed during two types of catastrophic events—a pandemic influenza and multiple intentional introductions of foot-and-mouth disease—are insufficient. For example, part of DHS's effort to identify the necessary workforce to respond to a foot-and-mouth disease outbreak lacks crucial data, such as how the disease would spread in wildlife. If wildlife became infected, as they have in the past, the response would be greatly complicated and could require more veterinarians and different types of expertise.

GAO made numerous recommendations in its veterinarian workforce report to help ensure sufficient veterinarian capacity to protect public and animal health. Among these, we recommended that the Secretary of Agriculture direct FSIS to periodically assess whether its level of

inspection resources dedicated to food safety and humane slaughter activities is sufficient. We also recommended that the Secretaries of Agriculture and Health and Human Services conduct departmentwide assessments of their veterinarian workforces to identify current and future workforce needs (including training and employee development) and departmentwide solutions to problems shared by its agencies. We further recommended that the Director of the Office of Personnel Management determine, based on USDA's and HHS's departmentwide veterinarian workforce evaluations, whether a governmentwide effort is needed to address shortcomings in the sufficiency of the current and future veterinarian workforce.

In conclusion, the nation is facing a growing shortage of veterinarians, and component agencies have already identified insufficiencies in their veterinarian workforces. Unless USDA and HHS conduct departmentwide assessments of their veterinarian workforces, they will not fully understand the size and nature of the challenges they face in recruiting and retaining veterinarians with the appropriate skills. This will leave their component agencies without a high-level solution to problems they have so far been unable to solve on their own. Moreover, without departmentwide assessments, OPM will not have the information it needs to assess current and future veterinarian workforce needs governmentwide, and the federal government will be missing opportunities to find common solutions for attracting veterinarians into federal service. If the federal government as a whole does not proactively assess current and future veterinarian workforce needs—for both routine and catastrophic events—it will continue to undermine its ability to protect the health of people, animals, and the economy.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions that you or Members of the Subcommittee may have at this time.

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

For further information about this testimony, please contact Lisa Shames, Director, Natural Resources and Environment, at (202) 512-3841, or shamesl@gao.gov. Key contributors to this testimony were Mary Denigan-Macauley and Michelle K. Treistman. Kevin Bray, Nancy Crothers, and Carol Kolarik also made important contributions. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this testimony.

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