

## USDA Criticised over Hog Inspection Projects

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**US - The USDA has come under fire for failing to make a full evaluation of pilot projects set up as a basis for changes in the poultry processing inspection system.**

The Government Accountability Office said that the USDA did not thoroughly evaluate the performance of each of the pilot projects over time even though the agency stated it would do so when it announced the pilot projects.

Similar lapses have also been found in the evaluation of test schemes for hog inspections in processing plants, as the USDA develops new formats for inspection.

Now the GAO has called on the USDA to collect and analyse information to determine if the young hog pilot project is meeting its purpose and to clearly disclose to the public limitations in the information it relied on for the proposed rule to modernise poultry slaughter inspections.

In making the criticisms, the GAO said that in 2011, USDA completed a report evaluating the pilot project at 20 young chicken plants concluding that an inspection system based on the pilot project would ensure equivalent, if not better, levels of food safety and quality than currently provided at plants not in the pilot project.

But the GAO said the USDA used just snapshots of data for two two-year periods instead of data throughout the whole of the pilot project.

The pilot project had been running for more than a decade.

The USDA did not complete an evaluation on or prepare a report evaluating the pilot project at five young turkey plants and has no plans to do so because of the small sample size, the GAO report says.

However, a proposed new rule includes an optional new poultry (chicken and turkey) inspection system and the USDA said that the new system was based on its experience with the pilot projects at young chicken and young turkey plants.

"As a result, USDA may not have assurance that its evaluation of the pilot project at young chicken plants provides the information necessary to support the proposed rule for both chickens and turkeys," the GAO said.

And the USDA does not intend to carry out another evaluation before it issues a final rule.

The USDA has also started a draft of a preliminary report evaluating the pilot project at young hog plants using analyses similar to those presented in the report evaluating young chicken plants, suggesting that similar limitations may apply.

"Agency officials stated that when USDA develops a proposed rulemaking to modify its slaughter inspection system for hogs, the agency will need to decide whether to collect additional data," the GAO report says.

"Without collecting and analysing additional data, it will be difficult for USDA to draw conclusions about whether the pilot project at young hog plants is meeting its purpose. While the pilot project is on-going, USDA has the opportunity to collect and analyse additional information."

GAO said it had identified strengths and weaknesses of the three pilot projects based on the views cited most frequently by 11 key stakeholder groups representing industry, labour, consumer advocacy, and animal welfare.

The GAO said the strengths included giving plants responsibility and flexibility for ensuring food safety and quality and allowing USDA inspectors to focus more on food safety activities.

However, the weaknesses included that training of plant personnel assuming sorting responsibilities on the slaughter line is not required or standardised and that faster line speeds allowed under the pilot projects raise concerns about food safety and worker safety.

The GAO added that the USDA did not disclose certain limitations in sources of information it relied on to develop the cost-benefit analysis supporting the proposed rule on modernising poultry slaughter inspections, which meant that stakeholders did not have complete and accurate information to inform their comments on the proposed rule and its potential impacts.

Ashley Peterson, Ph.D., NCC vice president of scientific and regulatory affairs said: "The National Chicken Council agrees with GAO's conclusions that strengths of the modernized poultry inspection system include giving plants responsibility and flexibility for ensuring food safety and quality and allowing USDA inspectors to focus more on food safety activities."

"This proposal is about making food safer – period. In an effort to continue our progress towards reducing foodborne illnesses, we believe that the poultry inspection system should be modernised to transition to a model that is more science and risk-based, from one that was implemented in 1957." Dr Petersen added that in response to GAO's recommendation for disclosure and more data needed to clarify the impact of changes to poultry inspection, USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) said in the report that the agency has already updated the analyses used to support the proposed rule, and the results continue to support moving forward with it.

According to the report, FSIS will present the updated analyses with it issues the final rule, in a manner that will facilitate public understanding of the information used to support the rulemaking. She also addressed the issue of increased line speeds and claims of their effects on worker safety and food safety.

"OSHA data speaks for itself: we have a sustained record of improving the safety of our workplace during the last two decades. Over the past 14 years of this pilot program there has been no evidence to substantiate the assertion that increased line speeds will increase injuries.

"It is not in a poultry company's best interests to operate at speeds that would harm its workers, and common sense tells you it is not in a company's best interest to operate at speeds that cannot produce safe and high quality poultry products," she said.

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