



USDA Agency Activities for Agroterrorism Prevention, Detection, and Response

Audit Report 50701-0001-21

OIG reviewed APHIS', ARS', and FSIS' plans and actions to prevent, detect, and respond to agroterrorism threats or attacks.

OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to determine if APHIS, ARS, and FSIS had developed plans and initiated actions to prevent, detect, and respond to agroterrorism threats or attacks.

REVIEWED

We reviewed directives, regulations, and guidance; interviewed agency officials; and reviewed documents related to agroterrorism preparedness primarily from 2011 to 2017. We conducted fieldwork in Beltsville, Maryland; Riverdale, Maryland; and Washington, D.C. We performed fieldwork from November 2016 to May 2018.

RECOMMENDS

All three agencies need to compile agroterrorism preparedness actions during the year. APHIS and ARS need to identify actions to report as vulnerability assessments, and all three agencies need to regularly assess and update the status of efforts to mitigate vulnerabilities. Finally, the agencies need to document processes to annually track and report on corrective actions from exercises or incident responses.

WHAT OIG FOUND

Agroterrorism is a threat to national security and could result in human illness and death, destruction of crops and livestock, and economic loss to farmers and ranchers. The Office of Inspector General (OIG) focused on three Department of Agriculture (USDA) agencies with mission areas related to agroterrorism and emergency preparedness: the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), and the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). We found the agencies developed plans and initiated actions to prevent, detect, and respond to agroterrorism threats or attacks. However, we identified improvements the agencies can make to better track and report these actions.

First, OIG found that the three agencies did not have information readily available to respond to USDA's Office of Homeland Security (OHS) requests related to the Homeland Security Presidential Directive-9 tracking document, the Sector Critical Infrastructure Protection Annual Report, and the Food and Agriculture Sector-Specific Plan. Also, APHIS and ARS did not report vulnerability assessment actions or results to OHS. FSIS did report vulnerability assessments, but did not have sufficient information to indicate the status of corrective actions to address vulnerabilities.

Finally, all three agencies need to make improvements to track and implement corrective actions from exercises or actual incidents. The agencies generally agreed with our recommendations. OHS said these recommendations should bolster its efforts to oversee USDA's agroterrorism preparedness. We accepted management decision on all 12 recommendations in the audit report.



United States Department of Agriculture
Office of Inspector General
Washington, D.C. 20250



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AUDIT
NUMBER: 50701-0001-21

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SUBJECT: USDA Agency Activities for Agroterrorism Prevention, Detection, and Response

This report presents the results of the subject audit. Your written responses are included in their entirety at the end of the report. Excerpts from your responses and the Office of Inspector General's position are incorporated in the relevant sections of the report. Based on your written responses, we are accepting management decision for all 12 audit recommendations in the report.

In accordance with Departmental Regulation 1720-1, final action is to be taken within 1 year of each management decision to prevent being listed in the Department's annual Agency Financial Report. Please follow your internal agency procedures in forwarding final action correspondence to OCFO.

We appreciate the courtesies and cooperation extended to us by members of your staff during our audit fieldwork and subsequent discussions. This report contains publicly available information and will be posted in its entirety to our website (<http://www.usda.gov/oig>) in the near future.

cc (w/ attachment): Josh Bornstein, Acting Director, Office of Homeland Security

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Background and Objective

Background

Agroterrorism is defined as the deliberate introduction of an animal or plant disease for the purpose of generating fear, causing economic loss, or undermining social stability.¹ The Food and Agriculture Sector's critical infrastructure² includes "open areas (for example, farms, ranches, or livestock transport areas) and complex systems"³ that make them vulnerable to an agroterrorist attack. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack in the U.S., Congress enacted the Homeland Security Act of 2002.⁴ The President also issued a series of Homeland Security Presidential Directives (HSPD), of which HSPD-7⁵ and HSPD-9⁶ have the most relevance to our audit.

Homeland Security Presidential Directives

HSPD-7 established a national policy for Federal departments and agencies to "identify and prioritize United States critical infrastructure and key resources and to protect them from terrorist attacks."⁷ HSPD-7 also designated the Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a Sector-Specific Agency.⁸ In 2013, Presidential Policy Directive (PPD)-21 replaced HSPD-7 and established a "national policy on critical infrastructure security and resilience" and "a shared responsibility among the Federal, State, local, tribal, and territorial entities, and public and private owners and operators of critical infrastructure."⁹ PPD-21 also designated USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services as co-Sector-Specific Agencies for the Food and Agriculture Sector. As a Sector-Specific Agency,¹⁰ USDA is required to develop and submit Sector-Specific Plans (SSP) to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) for the development of a comprehensive National Infrastructure Protection Plan.¹¹

¹ Congressional Research Service, *Report for Congress, Agroterrorism: Threats and Preparedness* (Mar. 12, 2007).

² The Patriot Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-56, 115 Stat. 401 (2001), defined the critical infrastructure as "systems and assets, whether physical or virtual, so vital to the United States that the incapacity or destruction of such systems and assets would have a debilitating impact on security, national economic security, national public health or safety, or any combination of those matters."

³ Department of Homeland Security, Department of Agriculture, and Food and Drug Administration, *Food and Agriculture Sector-Specific Plan* (2015).

⁴ The Homeland Security Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-296, 116 Stat. 2135.

⁵ HSPD-7, *Critical Infrastructure Identification, Prioritization, and Protection* (Dec. 17, 2003).

⁶ HSPD-9, *Defense of United States Agriculture and Food* (Jan. 30, 2004).

⁷ HSPD-7, *Critical Infrastructure Identification, Prioritization, and Protection* (Dec. 17, 2003).

⁸ HSPD-7 defines a Sector-Specific Agency as a Federal department or agency responsible for infrastructure protection activities.

⁹ PPD-21, *Critical Infrastructure Security and Resilience* (Feb. 12, 2013).

¹⁰ Sector Specific Agencies shall coordinate with DHS as part of the broader national effort to strengthen the security and resilience of critical infrastructure.

¹¹ The purpose of the National Infrastructure Protection Plan 2013: *Partnering for Critical Infrastructure Security and Resilience* "is to guide the national effort to manage risk of the Nation's critical infrastructure." The 2013 National Infrastructure Protection Plan required each Sector-Specific Agency to update the SSP every 4 years.

HSPD-9 “establishe[d] a national policy to defend the agriculture and food system against terrorist attacks, major disasters, and other emergencies.”¹² HSPD-9 directed USDA, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Environmental Protection Agency to perform their responsibilities as Sector-Specific Agencies as delineated in HSPD-7, with DHS as lead in coordinating the overall national effort to enhance the protection of critical infrastructure and key resources. HSPD-9 outlined roles and responsibilities for USDA, some of which include developing early warning capabilities, identifying and mitigating vulnerabilities, and enhancing response and recovery in the event of a terrorist attack, major disaster, or other emergency.

Office of Homeland Security

The Office of Homeland Security (OHS)¹³ is responsible for overseeing and coordinating protection and resiliency efforts with all USDA agencies to ensure the safety of the food supply.¹⁴ The Secretary of Agriculture delegated specific authorities to OHS, including the authority to “oversee the Department’s ability to collect and disseminate information and prepare for an agricultural disease emergency, agroterrorist act, or other threat to agricultural biosecurity, and coordinate such activities among agencies and offices within the Department.”¹⁵ OHS should collaborate with the Food and Drug Administration to compile and submit to DHS on an annual basis a comprehensive report for the Food and Agriculture Sector, entitled the Sector Critical Infrastructure Protection Annual Report (SAR).¹⁶ OHS also compiles HSPD-9 compliance responses and activities from USDA agencies using a tracking document to monitor and report on agroterrorism preparedness to the Department and DHS.¹⁷

USDA Agencies

Our audit focused on three USDA agencies: the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), and the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). We chose these three agencies because their mission areas are related to food safety and/or animal and plant health. In addition, OHS contacted these agencies to collect information on HSPD-9 activities and to develop the 2015 SSP.

¹² HSPD-9, *Defense of United States Agriculture and Food* (Jan. 30, 2004).

¹³ OHS was previously known as the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Coordination.

¹⁴ USDA Departmental Manual (DM) 1800-001, *Incident Preparedness, Response, and Recovery*, Chapter 6, Parts 2 and 3 (Dec. 2011).

¹⁵ 7 Code of Federal Regulations § 2.95(b)(5).

¹⁶ USDA DM 1800-001, *Incident Preparedness, Response, and Recovery*, Chapter 6, Part 9 (Dec. 2011). The SAR documents efforts to identify, prioritize, and coordinate critical infrastructure protection.

¹⁷ OHS developed an HSPD-9 tracking document in 2015 in response to a Government Accountability Office (GAO) audit (GAO-11-652, *Actions Needed to Improve Response to Potential Terrorist Attacks and Natural Disasters Affecting Food and Agriculture*, Aug. 2011).

APHIS

APHIS' mission includes protecting and promoting U.S. agriculture health, animal welfare, and carrying out wildlife damage management activities. Within APHIS, the Veterinary Services (VS) and Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) units perform activities related to agroterrorism prevention, detection, and response. VS protects and improves the health, quality, and marketability of U.S. animals, animal products, and veterinary biologics, and takes steps to prevent, control, and eliminate animal diseases.¹⁸ PPQ safeguards U.S. agriculture and natural resources against the entry, establishment, and spread of economically and environmentally significant pests, and facilitates the safe trade of agricultural products.¹⁹ VS and PPQ develop response plans for specific animal and plant diseases, conduct exercises that test response and emergency management capabilities, and create reports that contain corrective actions for addressing areas of weakness. APHIS' Emergency Management Safety and Security Division (EMSSD) provides services that support agency and interagency emergency management activities, such as coordinating responses to information requests from OHS.

ARS

ARS "conducts research to develop and transfer solutions to agricultural problems of high national priority" and makes information available to its stakeholders "to ensure high quality, safe food, and other agricultural products."²⁰ ARS research efforts support USDA agencies, including APHIS and FSIS, by seeking new methods and strategies to improve food safety, food defense, or to prevent, detect, and respond to plant and animal diseases. ARS organizes research into 16 national programs. National programs related to agroterrorism prevention, detection, and response include Food Safety and Animal Health. The Food Safety National Program's research seeks ways to assess, control, or eliminate potentially harmful food contaminants. These contaminants include intentionally introduced and naturally occurring pathogenic bacteria, viruses and parasites, and toxins. The Animal Health National Program's research delivers scientific information and tools to APHIS to detect, control, and eradicate animal diseases of high national priority. ARS directly supports HSPD-9 compliance by leading the development of the National Plant Disease Recovery System²¹ and indirectly by supporting the National Veterinary Stockpile²² through analysis for vaccines and diagnostics. Overall, ARS has a support role in emergency response and offers scientific expertise to agroterrorism-related exercises hosted by other entities.

¹⁸ USDA-APHIS, *Mission*, https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/animalhealth/program-overview/SA_About_VS (last visited Apr. 4, 2018).

¹⁹ USDA-APHIS, *PPQ Program Overview*, <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/planthealth/ppq-program-overview> (last visited Apr. 4, 2018).

²⁰ USDA-ARS, *About ARS*, <https://www.ars.usda.gov/about-ars/> (last visited Apr. 4, 2018).

²¹ HSPD-9 required the development of a National Plant Disease Recovery System, which is capable of responding to high consequence plant disease with pest control measures to sustain a reasonable level of production for economically important crops.

²² HSPD-9 required the creation of a National Veterinary Stockpile that contains sufficient amounts of animal vaccine, antiviral, or therapeutic products to appropriately respond to the most damaging animal diseases affecting human health and the economy and that will be capable of deployment within 24 hours of an outbreak.

FSIS

FSIS is responsible for protecting the public's health by safeguarding the commercial supply of meat, poultry, processed egg products, and Siluriformes (for example, catfish).²³ Food defense is a priority for FSIS. The agency works with Federal, State, and local government agencies, industry, and other organizations to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from intentional contamination of the food supply. FSIS encourages establishments to voluntarily adopt a functional food defense plan to prevent, detect, and recover from intentional food contamination incidents. In addition, FSIS performs vulnerability assessments to identify potential threat agents, aggressors, food products, and elements of the production, processing, and distribution systems with the greatest vulnerability for adulteration. Based on the results of vulnerability assessments, FSIS implements and recommends to partners corrective actions and mitigation strategies to strengthen food defense.²⁴ These recommendations are not mandatory, but offer possible countermeasures that establishments can implement to better protect against intentional contamination. FSIS publishes this information on the agency's Food Defense and Emergency Response webpage.²⁵ FSIS also conducts exercises to test incident response capabilities and recommends actions to correct problems encountered during the exercises.

Prior Audit

In March 2017, we completed an audit that focused on OHS' actions related to agroterrorism prevention, detection, and response.²⁶ We found that OHS did not adequately oversee and coordinate USDA's efforts to prevent, detect, and respond to agroterrorism. We also found that OHS did not demonstrate that USDA was in compliance with HSPD-9 requirements, and that OHS developed and published a 2015 SSP that was a limited representation of USDA's efforts to secure the Nation's agriculture and food supply. We recommended that OHS develop and implement written processes to oversee USDA's agroterrorism prevention, detection, and response activities; develop and implement a comprehensive process to track USDA's compliance with HSPD-9; and improve the process used to create the SSP.²⁷

Objective

Our objective was to determine if USDA agencies have developed plans and initiated actions to prevent, detect, and respond to agroterrorism threats or attacks. We concluded that the agencies have developed plans and initiated actions to prevent, detect, and respond to agroterrorism threats or attacks. However, we identified improvements the agencies can make to better track and report these actions.

²³ Food Safety and Inspection Service, *Strategic Plan, 2017-2021*; 9 Code of Federal Regulations §§ 530.1-561.2.

²⁴ Other FSIS partners include Federal agencies, State and local governments, and academia.

²⁵ This website is accessible at the following web address: <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/food-defense-defense-and-emergency-response>.

²⁶ Audit Report, 61701-0001-21, *Agroterrorism Prevention, Detection, and Response*, Mar. 2017.

²⁷ As part of these improvements, we recommended that OHS implement an integrated data collection process that requests information to populate the SAR, SSP, and HSPD-9 tracking document.

Section 1: Tracking and Reporting Agroterrorism Preparedness Actions

Finding 1: Agencies Need to Improve Their Processes to Compile Information on Agroterrorism Preparedness

APHIS, ARS, and FSIS did not have information readily available to respond to USDA’s Office of Homeland Security (OHS) requests related to the HSPD-9 tracking document, the Sector Critical Infrastructure Protection Annual Report (SAR), and the Food and Agriculture Sector-Specific Plan (SSP). The agencies did not have a process to proactively compile complete information during the year to provide to OHS and instead waited for OHS to request the information. Prior to our previous audit,²⁸ OHS had not routinely requested agroterrorism preparedness information from agencies. However, based on a recommendation from that audit, OHS stated that it will be making an annual integrated request for HSPD-9 tracking document, SAR, and SSP inputs. Timely and comprehensive responses from the agencies will enhance OHS’ ability to assess HSPD-9 compliance, to report on Department-wide accomplishments, and to identify improvements related to agroterrorism preparedness.

GAO’s *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*²⁹ specify that agencies have readily available, complete, and accurate information to evaluate their performance in achieving key objectives and addressing risks.³⁰ Specifically, these standards stipulate that management properly manage and maintain records and have clear documentation of significant events that is readily available for examination.³¹ In addition, these standards specify that management evaluates communication methods so that the organization has the appropriate tools to timely communicate quality information outside of the entity.³² Management should use quality information to achieve the entity’s objectives by obtaining relevant data from internal sources in a timely manner. According to the standards, “quality information is appropriate, current, complete, accurate, accessible, and provided on a timely basis.”³³

In our previous audit related to agroterrorism,³⁴ we concluded that OHS had not adequately overseen and coordinated the Department’s efforts to prevent, detect, and respond to an agroterrorism attack.³⁵ Our resulting recommendations required OHS to increase communication and requests for information from agencies on an annual basis.³⁶ Specifically,

²⁸ Audit Report 61701-0001-21, *Agroterrorism Prevention, Detection, and Response*, Mar. 2017.

²⁹ USDA Departmental Regulation 1110-002, *Management’s Responsibility for Internal Control*, states that agency heads are responsible for establishing and maintaining a system of internal control in accordance with GAO standards within their agencies.

³⁰ GAO-14-704G, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, paragraph 13.05 (Sep. 2014).

³¹ *Ibid.*, paragraph 10.03 (Sep. 2014).

³² *Ibid.*, paragraphs 15.07-15.08 (Sep. 2014).

³³ *Ibid.*, paragraphs 13.01-13.05 (Sep. 2014).

³⁴ Audit Report 61701-0001-21, *Agroterrorism Prevention, Detection, and Response*, Mar. 2017.

³⁵ OHS is responsible for coordinating all homeland security activities for the Department, but relies on information from the agencies in order to prepare these documents.

³⁶ OHS agreed to implement these recommendations and update departmental guidance accordingly by March 31, 2018. However, as of August 3, 2018, OHS had completed final action for 9 of 14 recommendations.

OHS is developing a procedure to make an annual integrated data request to agencies on agroterrorism preparedness efforts in order to create a HSPD-9 tracking document, SAR, and SSP.

As part of the current audit, we identified the need for each agency to proactively compile information on completed and planned actions related to agroterrorism preparedness. OHS can use information on agency actions such as advancements in disease surveillance and monitoring capabilities, improvements to laboratory networks, enhancements in mitigation strategies, and new disease countermeasures to demonstrate USDA's compliance with HSPD-9.³⁷ We asked officials from each agency to describe their process to compile and submit agroterrorism preparedness information to OHS. None of the agencies proactively compiled information to address OHS' request. Instead, the agencies collected data only after OHS asked for information. In our previous audit, we determined that OHS officials had not routinely obtained this type of information since they had not issued a SAR since 2011 and started to track HSPD-9 activities in 2015. However, OHS has stated that it will be making an annual request for information from agencies in order to create a HSPD-9 tracking document, SAR, and SSP. By proactively compiling material about completed agroterrorism activities throughout the year and planned activities for future periods, the agencies can comply with GAO's *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* and have quality information readily available to address OHS' annual request. This agency information will improve OHS' ability to oversee the Department's agroterrorism preparedness activities.

In addition, compiling information on agroterrorism preparedness actions throughout the year to include in the SAR will allow agency officials to assess their progress towards meeting Food and Agriculture Sector goals and priorities. The 2015 SSP established five sector goals for 2015-2019 and five priorities that support the sector goals.³⁸ The goals include supporting response and recovery at the sector level and improving analytical methods to bolster prevention and response efforts. One priority is to improve the ability to prevent, detect, and respond to animal and plant disease outbreaks and food contamination through the expansion of laboratory systems and qualified personnel. Another priority is to enhance and integrate existing information sharing approaches. If agency officials compile information about agroterrorism preparedness actions during the year, they will be able to report the accomplishments to OHS for inclusion in the SAR. In addition, agency officials will be able to evaluate how well the agency is progressing toward meeting the SSP's goals and priorities and, if necessary, take steps to better demonstrate accomplishments in these areas.³⁹

We discuss our specific analysis and conclusions for each agency in the following sections.

³⁷ HSPD-9, *Defense of United States Agriculture and Food*, Sections 8(a), 8(c), 12, and 23 (Jan. 30, 2004).

³⁸ The SSP's goals support DHS' Joint National Priorities for Critical Infrastructure Security and Resilience. The SSP's priorities are linked to authoritative guidance such as HSPD-9, the National Infrastructure Protection Plan, and PPD-8.

³⁹ According to the 2015 Food and Agriculture SSP, Sector-Specific Agencies prepare a SAR each year that describes accomplishments in meeting sector goals.

APHIS

APHIS had a documented process to respond to requests from OHS, but the agency did not compile agroterrorism information proactively to have it readily available when OHS asked for it. We asked APHIS what process was in place to collect information on the agency's activities to support HSPD-9 compliance and future SARs and SSPs. APHIS responded that the Emergency Management Safety and Security Division (EMSSD) distributes requests for information to different points of contact within the agency for input. EMSSD then consolidates the comments from the points of contact and prepares a response to the request. This process did not enable APHIS to have complete agroterrorism preparedness information readily available because officials collected it only after OHS' request.

In responding to OHS' request, APHIS experienced complications that the agency could have prevented by proactively compiling information on agroterrorism preparedness actions. For instance, an APHIS official stated that the agency needed time to review responses for OHS to ensure consistency with information shared with other parties. The official also noted that OHS did not allow the agency much time to respond to requests.⁴⁰ By proactively compiling information in anticipation of OHS' annual HSPD-9 tracking document, SAR, and SSP request, APHIS officials will have more time to collect information and ensure that they provide consistent responses to similar inquiries. Therefore, APHIS needs to revise its process to respond to information requests to include a step to compile completed agroterrorism preparedness actions throughout the year and planned activities for future periods.

We discussed our conclusions with APHIS officials, and they commented that OHS had not consistently requested information, which made it difficult for them to understand what information OHS needed. We agree that OHS had not routinely and consistently obtained agroterrorism preparedness information from the agencies. However, OHS stated that it would implement a procedure to make an annual integrated data request from agencies on agroterrorism preparedness efforts in order to create the HSPD-9 tracking document, SAR, and SSP.⁴¹ OHS' new process should result in more consistency in terms of timing and requested information, and APHIS should proactively compile data in order to provide a comprehensive and timely response.

ARS

ARS did not have information readily available to respond to OHS' requests related to the HSPD-9 tracking document, SAR, and SSP, and did not have a documented process to compile this information to provide to OHS. When ARS received a data request from OHS, the agency's Director of Homeland Security compiled information from the Office

⁴⁰ The APHIS official noted that OHS requested information and asked that the agency provide it within 2 weeks. The official noted that a 30-day response time was more reasonable.

⁴¹ OHS estimated that it would implement this procedure by March 31, 2018. However, as of August 3, 2018, OHS had completed final action for 9 of 14 recommendations.

of National Programs.⁴² The ARS Director of Homeland Security consolidated the responses and provided the information to OHS. ARS officials had not documented the collection process and provided information only when OHS requested it.

Since ARS had not documented its process, the agency may not be able to compile all the necessary information and provide it to OHS in a timely manner if there is a change in staff. In addition, the GAO's *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* stipulate that management properly manages and maintains records and has clear documentation of significant events that is readily available for examination.⁴³ Therefore, ARS needs to document the agency's process to respond to information requests and revise it to include a step to compile completed agroterrorism preparedness actions throughout the year and planned activities for future periods. We discussed this finding with ARS, and an official agreed with our conclusion. The official acknowledged that documenting ARS' process would allow the agency to continue to compile information effectively when there is staff turnover. The official stated that ARS could incorporate compiling agroterrorism preparedness information into the agency's existing annual reporting process.

FSIS

FSIS did not have information readily available to respond to OHS' requests related to the HSPD-9 tracking document, SAR, and SSP, and did not have a documented process to compile information to provide to OHS. Instead, FSIS officials informed us that they used an undocumented process to compile information on agroterrorism preparedness from relevant program areas after the agency received the request from OHS. In order to have information readily available related to the HSPD-9 tracking document, SAR, and SSP, FSIS needs to document the agency's process to respond to information requests and include a step to compile completed agroterrorism preparedness actions throughout the year and planned activities for future periods.

FSIS officials agreed that they needed to document their process, and after we briefed them on our findings, they provided us with a process for addressing OHS' and other information requests. However, FSIS officials disagreed that they should proactively collect data in anticipation of OHS' requests. FSIS officials disagreed because OHS had not been consistent with the frequency or content of past requests. The requests changed from year to year due to questions from outside the Department or changes in the threat landscape. Therefore, FSIS officials noted that waiting to compile information until OHS requested it was more efficient.

We acknowledge that OHS may need to make non-routine requests that agencies cannot specifically prepare for in order to obtain information about an exact threat or to address an external inquiry. However, GAO's *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* state that agencies have readily available, complete, and accurate

⁴² ARS officials noted that Animal Health, Food Safety, and Plant Disease National Programs had responsibility for reporting activities related to HSPD-9.

⁴³ GAO-14-704G, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, paragraph 10.03 (Sep. 2014).

information to evaluate their performance in achieving key objectives. Since HSPD-9 requirements do not change from year to year and the 2015 SSP established sector goals and priorities for the next 4 years, FSIS should compile information throughout the year to evaluate the agency's performance and achievements in meeting these set metrics. FSIS officials can ensure they have readily available, complete, and accurate information to respond to OHS' annual request by proactively compiling information on applicable completed activities throughout the year and planned activities for future periods. FSIS officials suggested leveraging other agency reporting requirements, such as the Strategic Plan, to compile this information.

We discussed this finding and recommendations with OHS officials. They agreed with our recommendations and stated that they are developing a standardized template to use for requesting agroterrorism preparedness information from the agencies. The standardized template should assist the agencies in proactively compiling information for OHS on an annual basis since the agencies will know how their responses need to be presented.

Overall, the three USDA agencies did not proactively compile information to have it readily available. Instead, the agencies waited for OHS to request the information before compiling data. OHS stated that it would be making a combined annual request for material from agencies to support HSPD-9 compliance, the SAR, and the SSP as a result of our previous audit. The agencies will be better prepared to provide more timely, detailed, and comprehensive responses to OHS' annual request if they implement documented processes to proactively compile information about key completed agroterrorism preparedness actions throughout the year and planned activities for future periods.

Recommendation 1 (to APHIS)

Revise the agency's current process to respond to information requests to include a step to compile completed agroterrorism preparedness actions throughout the year and planned activities for future periods.

Agency Response

In its August 1, 2018, response, APHIS stated that it would develop and implement a process to proactively collect information to respond to information needs regarding HSPD-9 implementation, the SAR, and the SSP following receipt of the procedure and standard format from OHS. APHIS anticipated receiving the standard format and procedure from OHS by August 15, 2018. APHIS stated that if the information is received by August 15, 2018, APHIS would implement an agency-level process to collect this information by December 31, 2018. APHIS later informed us that OHS provided a standard operating procedure by August 15, 2018.

OIG Position

We accept management decision for this recommendation.

Recommendation 2 (to ARS)

Formally document the agency's current process to respond to information requests and revise it to include a step to compile completed agroterrorism preparedness actions throughout the year and planned activities for future periods.

Agency Response

In its August 1, 2018, response, ARS stated that it would meet with OHS to build a reporting calendar and coordinate report requirements. This will form the basis of ARS' process to respond to information requests and ensure a timely and coordinated response at both the agency and the Department level. ARS stated that it would develop and implement an agroterrorism reporting standard operating procedure to compile completed agroterrorism preparedness actions throughout the year and planned activities for future periods. ARS provided an estimated completion date of August 31, 2019.

OIG Position

We accept management decision for this recommendation.

Recommendation 3 (to FSIS)

Formally document the agency's current process to respond to information requests and revise it to include a step to compile completed agroterrorism preparedness actions throughout the year and planned activities for future periods.

Agency Response

In its July 11, 2018, response, FSIS stated that it would leverage existing internal planning and reporting efforts, such as those related to strategic and budgetary activities, to track and compile planned and completed agroterrorism preparedness activities throughout the year. This step will be added to the existing standard operating procedures. FSIS provided an estimated completion date of October 31, 2018.

OIG Position

We accept management decision for this recommendation.

Finding 2: Agencies Need to Improve How They Communicate and Track Vulnerability Assessments

APHIS and ARS did not report vulnerability assessment actions to OHS. While FSIS did report vulnerability assessments to OHS, it did not have sufficient information about the status of corrective actions to indicate if vulnerabilities were addressed by agency officials or partners.⁴⁴ This occurred because APHIS and ARS did not have procedures in place to identify and report risk assessments and related efforts as vulnerability assessments. Also, FSIS did not consistently follow its procedures to document the status of corrective actions when the agency performed a vulnerability assessment update. Assessing vulnerabilities is an important step in developing security solutions and managing critical infrastructure risk.⁴⁵ Accordingly, OHS needs complete and accurate information about agency vulnerabilities and associated corrective actions in order to fulfill its responsibilities to oversee the Department's agroterrorism preparedness.⁴⁶

HSPD-9 requires that the Secretaries of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, and Homeland Security expand and continue vulnerability assessments of the agriculture and food sectors and update them every 2 years.⁴⁷ Although HSPD-9 does not define a vulnerability assessment or include specific details about what actions constitute one other than identifying requirements of the National Infrastructure Protection Plan;⁴⁸ DHS defines a vulnerability assessment as a "product or process of identifying physical features or operational attributes that render an entity, asset, system, network, or geographic area susceptible or exposed to hazards."⁴⁹ Moreover, Departmental guidance states that a vulnerability assessment "identifies weaknesses in an asset design, implementation, or operation that can be exploited by an adversary."⁵⁰

As a part of our previous agroterrorism audit, we reviewed a HSPD-9 tracking document OHS created in response to a 2011 GAO recommendation for USDA to develop a Department-wide strategy for implementing HSPD-9 responsibilities.⁵¹ At that time, the HSPD-9 tracking document recorded that only one agency, FSIS, provided a response that it performed vulnerability assessments.⁵² OHS officials did not follow up with the agencies that did not provide information related to this requirement, which included APHIS and ARS. As a result, OHS officials did not know if agencies erroneously omitted the information or if they had not performed vulnerability assessments. As a part of this audit, we requested vulnerability

⁴⁴ FSIS' partners for vulnerability assessments include other Federal agencies, industry, State and local governments, and academia.

⁴⁵ National Infrastructure Protection Plan 2013 Supplemental Tool: *National Protection and Programs Directorate Resources to Support Vulnerability Assessments*.

⁴⁶ The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, P.L. 110-246, Title XIV, Subtitle B, § 14111 (June 18, 2008).

⁴⁷ HSPD-9, *Defense of United States Agriculture and Food*, Section 11 (Jan. 30, 2004).

⁴⁸ The National Infrastructure Protection Plan states that critical infrastructure risks can be assessed in terms of threat, vulnerability, and consequence.

⁴⁹ DHS Risk Lexicon, Section II (Sep. 2010).

⁵⁰ USDA DM 1800-001, *Incident Preparedness, Response, and Recovery*, Chapter 6 (Dec. 2011).

⁵¹ GAO Audit Report, GAO-11-652, *Actions Needed to Improve Response to Potential Terrorist Attacks and Natural Disasters Affecting Food and Agriculture* (Aug. 2011).

⁵² OHS compiled responses from 8 USDA agencies about activities related to 20 HSPD-9 requirements as of July 2015 to create the tracking document.

assessment information from the three agencies to identify what actions they had taken in this area.⁵³

Our conclusions for each agency are below:

APHIS

After reviewing APHIS' fiscal year (FY) 2017 HSPD-9 tracking document submission to OHS, we found that the agency did not report any information related to the vulnerability assessment requirement. However, officials from APHIS' PPQ and VS units provided us with documentation of their actions related to risk identification, evaluation, and mitigation in response to our request for vulnerability assessment information.⁵⁴ Since APHIS did not have a procedure to identify and report these efforts as vulnerability assessments, OHS could not evaluate them as a part of overseeing the Department's HSPD-9 compliance.

We concluded that APHIS' actions to identify and assess potential threats could serve as vulnerability assessments for HSPD-9 compliance. We compared the DHS and USDA vulnerability assessment definitions to APHIS' risk identification, evaluation, and mitigation efforts such as those performed by VS' Risk Identification and Risk Assessment (RIRA) unit or PPQ's New Pest Advisory Group (NPAG).⁵⁵ We determined that RIRA's and NPAG's actions meet the DHS and USDA vulnerability assessment definitions⁵⁶ because APHIS utilized them to identify potential hazards that could be introduced and have a significant effect on U.S. agricultural assets.

For example, RIRA assesses the associated risks posed by emerging animal diseases.⁵⁷ The severity of the assessed risk dictates the additional steps APHIS will take to evaluate, characterize, or mitigate the disease. RIRA will recommend possible response options to APHIS' management, which could include monitoring the disease or implementing import restrictions on the affected countries. RIRA performed 22 assessments focused on the introduction and transmission of animal diseases between 2012 and 2017.

PPQ's NPAG works to safeguard U.S. agriculture and the environment from risks associated with the introduction and establishment of exotic plant pests.⁵⁸ NPAG assesses the biology and potential economic and environmental impacts associated with a newly introduced or exotic plant pest with a potential pathway

⁵³ We made this request in November 2016 and asked for information for the previous 5 years.

⁵⁴ We discuss these actions in more detail in subsequent paragraphs.

⁵⁵ We provide more details on RIRA and NPAG in subsequent paragraphs.

⁵⁶ DHS Risk Lexicon, Section II (Sep. 2010) and USDA DM 1800-001, *Incident Preparedness, Response, and Recovery*, Chapter 6 (Dec. 2011).

⁵⁷ VS defines an emerging animal disease as any terrestrial animal, aquatic animal, or zoonotic disease not yet known or characterized, or any known or characterized terrestrial animal or aquatic disease in the U.S. or its territories that changes or mutates in pathogenicity, communicability, or zoonotic potential to become a threat to terrestrial animals, aquatic animals, or humans.

⁵⁸ PPQ defines pests as insects and other arthropods, weeds, plant disease agents, and microorganisms.

to migrate to the U.S. NPAG documents the assessment in a report that includes recommendations such as evaluating import regulations or changing port policies. According to PPQ, NPAG produced 119 reports between 2012 and 2017. Overall, the RIRA and the NPAG results demonstrate that APHIS has taken actions to identify potentially harmful animal diseases and plant pests, but the agency did not report these efforts to OHS to demonstrate HSPD-9 compliance.

Since APHIS did not report any vulnerability assessment information to OHS, the agency needs to identify actions, such as the work performed by RIRA and NPAG, which can serve as vulnerability assessments for HSPD-9 compliance. It is important that APHIS report these activities to OHS because of the agency's significant role to help protect the health and value of U.S. agriculture and natural resources. This information will help OHS oversee the Department's agroterrorism preparedness because it will provide a more accurate picture of the agency's vulnerabilities. In addition, OHS will be able to prepare a more comprehensive Department-wide vulnerability assessment if it has complete information from the agencies about existing and mitigated vulnerabilities.

We also identified two steps APHIS can take to improve communication and tracking of vulnerability assessments. First, APHIS demonstrated that it had different documented processes that could be adapted to serve as vulnerability assessments. To comply with HSPD-9, APHIS officials will need to revise existing procedures to include a requirement to perform and report updates of vulnerability assessments every 2 years, or to document the determination why an update is unnecessary.⁵⁹ In addition, APHIS will need to adjust existing processes to include steps to regularly assess and update the status of efforts to mitigate vulnerabilities and of previous recommendations. APHIS needs to take these actions because VS officials informed us that there was no dedicated group to track VS risk assessments and no set timeframe for assessment updates.⁶⁰ Similarly, PPQ officials stated that the NPAG process is complete and the file is closed once recommendations are sent to the appropriate authority in PPQ.⁶¹ By implementing these two steps, APHIS will be able to ensure the actions reported as vulnerability assessments meet the HSPD-9 requirement for updates every 2 years and verify if recommendations have been implemented to address vulnerabilities.

We discussed these recommendations with APHIS officials, and they agreed that the agency performed a variety of assessments that could be considered as vulnerability assessments. In addition, an official acknowledged the need to amend their processes to report results outside the agency and that the agency currently does not consolidate work in this context. Another official noted that our recommendations would help APHIS communicate assessment activities outside the agency and validate what was done to address recommendations.

⁵⁹ HSPD-9, *Defense of United States Agriculture and Food*, Section 11 (Jan. 30, 2004).

⁶⁰ VS officials informed us that they updated assessments when there was a proposed change in policy or a change in the geographic distribution or epidemiology of the pathogen.

⁶¹ PPQ officials stated that they update NPAG reports based on the current state of events surrounding a particular pest and develop new recommendations, if needed.

ARS

ARS also performed actions, such as developing research plans and ranking select agents,⁶² that identified potential risks that the agency could consider as vulnerability assessments for HSPD-9 compliance purposes, but did not report these items to OHS. ARS provided us with the agency's responses to OHS for the FY 2017 HSPD-9 tracking document, and the agency did not report any information on vulnerability assessments. However, ARS provided us with information on actions that meet the DHS and USDA vulnerability assessment definitions because the agency identified research that would help to make U.S. agriculture less susceptible to disease or pest outbreaks.⁶³

ARS developed multi-year plans that outlined research needs in different national programs. We reviewed plans for ARS' animal health, food safety, and plant diseases national programs.⁶⁴ Each of the plans identified research needs related to agroterrorism preparedness. For example, one need is to pursue research for vaccines that can differentiate infected and vaccinated animals. Research is also needed to identify technologies with applications to surveillance systems for monitoring the food supply and for food defense.

In addition to research, ARS led a working group to rank select agents based on their threat to U.S. animal agriculture. ARS shared this ranking with APHIS to help assess available medical countermeasures for the National Veterinary Stockpile. An ARS official agreed that this select agent ranking was an example of results the agency could have reported as a vulnerability assessment. However, ARS did not have a process to recognize and report such vulnerability assessment activities to OHS to support the Department's compliance with HSPD-9.

As with APHIS, ARS needs to identify actions the agency performs that can serve as vulnerability assessments for HSPD-9 compliance and include them in the annual report to OHS. ARS also needs to revise processes for products the agency will consider to be vulnerability assessments for HSPD-9 compliance to update them every 2 years or document the determination why an update was not needed. In addition, ARS needs to regularly assess and update the status of efforts to mitigate vulnerabilities and implement previously recommended corrective actions. These processes will allow ARS to ensure the activities the agency reports as vulnerability assessments for HSPD-9 compliance purposes meet the 2-year update requirement. In addition, tracking corrective actions will provide ARS with more accurate information on whether research gaps and vulnerabilities still exist and need to be considered in future assessments. We discussed our finding and recommendations with ARS, and an official agreed that it was important

⁶² Select agents have the potential to pose a severe threat to both human and animal health, to plant health, or to animal and plant products.

⁶³ DHS Risk Lexicon, Section II (Sep. 2010) and USDA DM 1800-001, *Incident Preparedness, Response, and Recovery*, Chapter 6 (Dec. 2011).

⁶⁴ The animal health plan is for years 2017-2022, the food safety plan is for years 2016-2020, and the plant disease plan is for years 2017-2021.

for ARS to document and report on the agency's activities that serve as vulnerability assessments.

FSIS

FSIS officials performed and reported vulnerability assessments to OHS, but they did not have sufficient information for us to confirm that the agency or partners had implemented corrective actions to address vulnerabilities identified in prior years. FSIS completed 46 vulnerability assessments from 2003 through 2015 and reported this information to OHS for the HSPD-9 tracking document.⁶⁵ This total includes initial vulnerability assessments⁶⁶ of 14 different topics and 32 subsequent updates,⁶⁷ which typically occurred every 2 to 5 years. However, FSIS did not consistently follow its procedures to document the status of corrective actions during vulnerability assessment updates. Countermeasures identified during vulnerability assessments were used by FSIS to develop and update the Food Defense Risk Mitigation Tool.⁶⁸ This online tool helps industry identify countermeasures for specific activities or nodes within their facility that may be susceptible to intentional contamination.

We found that FSIS departed from its procedures after we reviewed six updates and identified that FSIS did not document the status of prior corrective actions in three of them. In addition, FSIS procedures only required documenting the status of corrective actions during a vulnerability assessment update. By not following up on the status of corrective actions in the interim period between updates, FSIS could not ensure that vulnerabilities were mitigated timely. Therefore, FSIS needs to revise its vulnerability assessment process to regularly assess and update the status of efforts to mitigate vulnerabilities and previously recommended corrective actions.

We discussed this issue with FSIS officials, and they agreed with our recommendation. An FSIS official suggested that rather than waiting until the next vulnerability assessment update, a better way to evaluate vulnerability assessment corrective action implementation was through the quarterly Food Defense tasks the agency began performing in April 2017.⁶⁹ These tasks allow FSIS inspectors to assess food defense

⁶⁵ FSIS did not complete any vulnerability assessments between October 2015 and March 2018. FSIS officials stated that they had paused to complete a summary analysis of vulnerabilities and to develop a strategy going forward.

⁶⁶ During initial vulnerability assessments, FSIS identified potential threat agents of concern and FSIS-regulated products at highest risk of adulteration, evaluated multiple attributes, and created process flow diagrams. FSIS developed initial recommendations and corrective actions based on results from the initial vulnerability assessments.

⁶⁷ Vulnerability assessment updates included revisions of flow diagrams used in the initial assessments, discussion and update of scenario assumptions, and confirmation or revision of processing characteristics. According to FSIS procedures, updates are supposed to document the status of the past corrective actions and possible new corrective actions.

⁶⁸ The FSIS Food Defense Risk Mitigation Tool is available on the FSIS website at https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/food-defense-defense-and-emergency-response/tools-resources-training/risk-mitigation-tool/ct_index.

⁶⁹ The food defense task is performed quarterly by inspection program personnel in all FSIS-regulated establishments. The task includes a series of questions that allow inspection program personnel to identify food defense practices that are being implemented by establishments, while simultaneously identifying vulnerabilities that

practices that are being implemented in establishments and provide insight into the status of how mitigation strategies identified during vulnerability assessments are being implemented by industry. FSIS also plans to review the task data to evaluate the status of corrective actions from prior vulnerability assessments. According to this official, FSIS had not determined how frequently the agency would perform this evaluation. We noted that as of March 2018, FSIS had not updated its procedures to include evaluating vulnerability assessment corrective actions through reviews of the Food Defense tasks. If formally documented and properly implemented, using the Food Defense tasks could be a viable means to evaluate the status of these corrective actions.

OHS will be able to oversee the Department's agroterrorism preparedness more effectively if it has complete and accurate information from the agencies about their vulnerabilities. Agencies will have a better understanding of existing vulnerabilities if they regularly assess and update the status of efforts to mitigate them. This information will also be useful for OHS officials because they can take into account the agencies' assessments and corrective actions when they perform a Department-wide vulnerability assessment. We discussed this finding with OHS officials, and they agreed that our recommendations would help them fulfill their responsibilities within the Department.

Recommendation 4 (to APHIS)

Identify actions the agency performs that can serve as vulnerability assessments for HSPD-9 compliance. Include these actions in the annual report to OHS on agroterrorism preparedness.

Agency Response

In its August 1, 2018, response, APHIS stated that it identified actions it performs that meet the definitions of vulnerability assessments for HSPD-9 compliance. APHIS stated that it conducts risk identifications and risk assessments for emerging and foreign animal diseases and plant pests. According to APHIS, these actions meet the DHS vulnerability assessment definitions because the agency utilizes them to identify potential animal and plant disease hazards that can have a significant effect on U.S. agricultural assets. APHIS stated that it would include these actions in its annual report to OHS in accordance with OHS' guidance. APHIS provided an estimated completion date of July 31, 2019.

OIG Position

We accept management decision for this recommendation.

may lead to intentional contamination. According to FSIS, task questions were developed based on findings from FSIS vulnerability assessments and, therefore, focus on areas or processes that have been found to be more vulnerable to intentional contamination.

Recommendation 5 (to APHIS)

Revise processes for products considered to be vulnerability assessments to (a) update them every 2 years or document the determination why an update was not needed, and (b) regularly assess and update the status of efforts to mitigate vulnerabilities and to address previous recommendations.

Agency Response

In its August 1, 2018, response, APHIS stated that it would formally document the criteria and revise internal processes to determine the frequency, if any, for updating national risk assessments for both animal and plant diseases. APHIS stated that it would also revise processes to track assessment updates and actions to mitigate vulnerabilities identified by an assessment. APHIS provided an estimated completion date of July 31, 2019.

OIG Position

We accept management decision for this recommendation.

Recommendation 6 (to ARS)

Identify actions the agency performs that can serve as vulnerability assessments for HSPD-9 compliance. Include these actions in the annual report to OHS on agroterrorism preparedness.

Agency Response

In its August 1, 2018, response, ARS stated that during its 5-year project planning process, the agency would identify vulnerabilities to be addressed in research projects in animal health, food safety, and plant disease (National Programs 103, 108, and 303) and include these vulnerabilities in the HSPD-9 annual report. In addition, ARS stated that it would meet with OHS to develop and implement an agroterrorism reporting standard operating procedure, which would include a section to report on progress made to address vulnerabilities identified in research in National Programs 103, 108, and 303 to be included in the HSPD-9 annual report. ARS provided an estimated completion date of August 31, 2019.

OIG Position

We accept management decision for this recommendation.

Recommendation 7 (to ARS)

Revise processes for products considered to be vulnerability assessments to (a) update them every 2 years or document the determination why an update was not needed, and (b) regularly assess and update the status of efforts to mitigate vulnerabilities and implement previously recommended corrective actions.

Agency Response

In its August 1, 2018, response, ARS stated that it would develop and implement an agroterrorism reporting standard operating procedure to include a biennial review of three research programs: animal health, food safety, and plant disease (National Programs 103, 108, and 303) to assess and update vulnerability assessments, as it applies to HSPD-9 reporting. ARS provided an estimated completion date of August 31, 2019.

OIG Position

We accept management decision for this recommendation.

Recommendation 8 (to FSIS)

Revise vulnerability assessment processes to regularly assess and update the status of efforts to mitigate vulnerabilities and previously recommended corrective actions.

Agency Response

In its July 11, 2018, response, FSIS stated that it implemented a new food defense task in April 2017, which allows inspection program personnel to collect information regarding food defense practices being implemented by industry. The task data are, and will continue to be, analyzed to determine how mitigation strategies identified during vulnerability assessments are being implemented by industry. FSIS also planned to review the task data to evaluate the status of corrective actions from previous vulnerability assessments. These procedures will be incorporated into standard operating procedures for performing FSIS vulnerability assessments. FSIS provided an estimated completion date of December 31, 2018.

OIG Position

We accept management decision for this recommendation.

Finding 3: Agencies Need to Improve How They Track Corrective Actions from Exercises and Incident Responses

APHIS, ARS, and FSIS need to make improvements to track and implement corrective actions identified by exercises or as the result of actual incidents. APHIS' PPQ program and FSIS did not have documented processes to track corrective action implementation. Because ARS' role in exercises was limited, the agency did not obtain and examine exercise after-action reports (AARs) to identify issues that could be addressed through future research. As such, issues the agencies encountered or weaknesses they identified during exercises or incident responses may continue to exist if the agencies do not ensure timely implementation of corrective actions.

According to Departmental guidance, exercises are the primary tool for assessing preparedness and identifying areas for improvement, and issues and observations recorded during and after exercises are to be captured in an AAR.⁷⁰ The guidance also states that agencies and offices should plan, conduct, and evaluate their exercises using applicable guidelines and principles provided within DHS' Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP).⁷¹ HSEEP stipulates that agencies capture corrective actions in AARs and continually report on those actions until they are complete.⁷² HSEEP states that tracking corrective actions until completion allows stakeholders to demonstrate that exercises yielded tangible improvements in preparedness.⁷³

In our previous audit report on agroterrorism, we identified several improvements that OHS needed to make related to oversight and coordination of the Department's ability to prevent, detect, and respond to agroterrorism.⁷⁴ We recommended that OHS obtain information from agencies about the purpose, frequency, and outcomes of exercises to identify lessons learned, distribute them to other USDA agencies, and ensure that agencies implement corrective actions in a timely manner.⁷⁵ Given that OHS will need information regarding exercises, we reviewed the agencies' processes for monitoring the implementation of corrective action based on exercises and real world response. We concluded that the agencies need to make improvements to track and implement corrective actions identified by exercises or as the result of actual incidents. We discuss our conclusions for each agency in the following sections.

⁷⁰ USDA DM 1800-001, *Incident Preparedness, Response, and Recovery*, Chapter 8 (Dec. 2011).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² DHS *HSEEP*, Chapter 6 (Apr. 2013).

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Audit Report 61701-0001-21, *Agroterrorism Prevention, Detection, and Response*, Mar. 2017.

⁷⁵ OHS agreed to implement this recommendation by March 31, 2018. However, as of August 3, 2018, OHS had completed final action for 9 of 14 recommendations.

APHIS

APHIS' PPQ program officials did not ensure they implemented corrective actions as a result of exercises.⁷⁶ We reviewed AARs related to full-scale exercises PPQ performed within the past 5 years and identified recommendations in the reports related to emergency preparedness.⁷⁷ For instance, one recommendation was to ensure that the incident command structure is designed so that important information reaches key personnel. The report also recommended that communication follows the chain of command from field personnel back to the incident command post. We asked PPQ officials what steps were in place to confirm that program managers implemented corrective actions to address recommendations. PPQ officials stated that they reviewed AARs and relayed the information to sub-units. However, PPQ did not verify that program managers implemented corrective actions. We attribute this to PPQ officials not having a documented process to monitor corrective action implementation. PPQ needs to use such a process so that issues encountered or weaknesses identified during exercises are addressed and do not continue to exist.

Similarly, PPQ did not document the status of all corrective actions as the result of actual incident responses. We reviewed response evaluation summaries PPQ produced for large-scale pest and disease responses. These summaries included recommendations such as communicating roles and responsibilities and identifying the primary point of contact throughout the response. We asked how PPQ tracked the implementation of these recommendations. Officials responded that they used an informal and undocumented process. We also asked PPQ officials if they had any documentation that identified the status of all recommended corrective actions from response evaluation summaries, and they did not have this information. In order to ensure that future responses are as effective as possible, PPQ needs to develop and implement a process to track and annually report on the implementation status of corrective actions based on actual incident responses.

We also determined that PPQ did not produce AARs for tabletop exercises.⁷⁸ According to PPQ's Training and Exercise Plan, tabletop exercises involve key personnel, senior staff, and elected or appointed officials who discuss hypothetical scenarios in an informal setting. The purpose of a tabletop exercise is to generate discussion of various issues regarding a hypothetical simulated emergency, and these discussions are effective when they prompt the revision of current policies, procedures, and plans.⁷⁹ PPQ participated in several types of exercises, such as tabletop, functional,⁸⁰ and full-scale exercises. PPQ officials informed us that they participated in 41 exercises between FYs 2012 through

⁷⁶ We verified that VS utilized a documented process to track the implementation of corrective actions based on exercises and real-world incident responses.

⁷⁷ According to PPQ's National Plant Health Emergency Management Framework, full-scale exercises consist of multi-agency, multi-jurisdictional, multi-discipline exercises involving functional and boots on the ground responses.

⁷⁸ VS produced AARs for tabletop exercises.

⁷⁹ DHS *HSEEP*, Chapter 2 (Apr. 2013).

⁸⁰ According to PPQ's training and exercise plan, a functional exercise is designed to validate and evaluate individual capabilities, multiple functions, activities within a function, or interdependent groups of functions.

2016, of which 29 were tabletop exercises. However, PPQ only developed AARs for functional and full-scale exercises.⁸¹ PPQ needs to develop and implement a process to create AARs for tabletop exercises so that the agency can benefit from conducting them by improving procedures and plans.

We discussed our finding and recommendations with PPQ officials. An official stated that he understood our concerns and would develop procedures that address these issues. The official noted that PPQ has formally responded to one or two incidents in the past 5 years. Overall, PPQ officials stated that they would develop a solution to track corrective measures and document this process.

ARS

ARS participated in exercises hosted by other Federal entities, but agency officials did not obtain and examine exercise AARs to identify issues that they could address through future research.⁸² ARS did not develop or host exercises because the agency's role is to support responders and not perform on-site functions. An ARS official explained that AARs may not have a strong benefit for ARS but agreed there could be an instructional element and opportunities to use the reports to identify additional research needs. We asked ARS officials if they had any documented policies or procedures that provide an outline for the agency's participation in exercises. ARS officials responded there were no written policies or procedures that provided a framework for participation in exercises and that the agency did not always follow up to obtain AARs.

In order to maximize the benefit of attending exercises, ARS needs to develop and implement a process to obtain and review AARs from exercises in which agency officials participated. ARS can then identify deficiencies or issues that the agency can help address through future research. ARS can evaluate progress towards helping address these items by annually assessing if the agency has initiated research in those areas. When we discussed this issue with an ARS official, he agreed with our finding and responded that the agency planned to request AARs from future exercises and review them to identify potential areas for future research.

FSIS

FSIS hosted and participated in exercises, but did not have a documented process to track the corrective actions that resulted from these exercises. Once FSIS completed an exercise and developed an AAR, a dedicated unit tracked corrective actions using a spreadsheet, and relevant program offices were responsible for implementing recommendations. However, we determined that FSIS had not documented this process based on our discussions with agency officials and evidence requests. FSIS needs to document this process so that the agency can consistently implement it, especially if there is staff turnover. Consistently tracking and implementing corrective actions is critical to

⁸¹ PPQ completed one functional exercise and three full-scale exercises between 2012 and 2016.

⁸² We reviewed information on six exercises ARS participated in between 2010 and 2016.

ensure that issues or weaknesses identified during exercises are resolved timely and in the proper manner.

As part of documenting the process to track corrective actions, FSIS also needs to annually report on the implementation status of corrective actions based on exercises.⁸³ We reviewed AARs related to agroterrorism and emergency preparedness that FSIS performed or participated in from 2012 through 2016. We determined that recommendations made within these AARs identified areas for improvement, but officials stated that they removed recommendations from the tracking spreadsheet after they implemented corrective actions.

We discussed with FSIS officials our concern about the lack of a documented process to track corrective actions. FSIS officials agreed with our finding and planned to document a formal process to track exercise corrective actions. In the interim while procedures are being developed, FSIS implemented a means to improve tracking corrective actions.⁸⁴

Overall, agencies need to improve how they track and implement corrective actions resulting from exercises or actual incidents. This will help agencies to respond more effectively to future incidents. In addition, OHS stated that it would be obtaining material from agencies about exercise outcomes and related corrective actions.⁸⁵ By improving their processes to track and implement corrective actions, the agencies will be able to provide OHS with more complete and accurate information. We discussed our issues with OHS officials, and they agreed these recommendations would be beneficial.

Recommendation 9 (to APHIS)

PPQ needs to develop and implement a process to track and annually report on the implementation status of corrective actions based on actual incident responses or exercises.

Agency Response

In its August 1, 2018, response, APHIS stated that it would develop a standard operating procedure on the process for tracking and annually reporting on the implementation status of corrective actions based on actual plan disease emergency outbreaks. This procedure will also provide guidance on including resolutions to the corrective actions as a part of the AARs. In addition, APHIS stated that PPQ would include a process to track and annually report on the implementation status of corrective actions in its training and exercise plan issued by the Professional Development Center. APHIS will design the process using HSEEP methodology for corrective actions. APHIS provided an estimated completion date of December 31, 2018.

⁸³ HSEEP states that tracking corrective actions until completion allows stakeholders to demonstrate that exercises yielded tangible improvements in preparedness.

⁸⁴ In December 2017, FSIS officials provided us with documentation of this improvement plan tracking tool, in the form of a spreadsheet template with instructions on how to track corrective actions.

⁸⁵ OHS intended to implement this action by March 31, 2018. OHS had not implemented this action as of August 3, 2018.

OIG Position

We accept management decision for this recommendation.

Recommendation 10 (to APHIS)

PPQ needs to develop and implement a process to create AARs for tabletop exercises.

Agency Response

In its August 1, 2018, response, APHIS stated that it would develop and implement a process to create AARs for tabletop exercises. APHIS provided an estimated completion date of December 31, 2018.

OIG Position

We accept management decision for this recommendation.

Recommendation 11 (to ARS)

Develop and implement a process to obtain AARs from exercises ARS officials participated in and review the AARs to identify deficiencies or issues experienced in the exercises that ARS can help address through future research. Include a step in the process to assess annually if ARS has initiated research to help address deficiencies or issues experienced in previous exercises.

Agency Response

In its August 1, 2018, response, ARS stated that it would involve the ARS Office of Homeland Security in all vulnerability exercises. The ARS Office of Homeland Security will follow up to obtain the AARs as a standard process and forward them to the ARS Office of National Programs. The Office of National Programs will work with the ARS Office of Homeland Security to develop and implement an agroterrorism reporting standard operating procedure to assess annually if ARS has initiated research to help address deficiencies or issues experienced in previous exercises. ARS provided an estimated completion date of August 31, 2019.

OIG Position

We accept management decision for this recommendation.

Recommendation 12 (to FSIS)

Document the process to track and annually report on the implementation status of corrective actions based on exercises.

Agency Response

In its July 11, 2018, response, FSIS stated that, in December 2017, it implemented a new method of tracking improvement plans for AARs. Standard operating procedures are being developed to explain how the tool is used and a methodology for annually reporting the implementation status of corrective actions from exercises. FSIS provided an estimated completion date of December 31, 2018.

OIG Position

We accept management decision for this recommendation.

Scope and Methodology

We performed audit fieldwork from November 2016 through May 2018. We conducted our audit by meeting with APHIS, ARS, and FSIS officials in Beltsville, Maryland; Riverdale, Maryland; and Washington, D.C. We also reviewed non-statistically selected documents primarily from calendar years 2011 through 2017 to determine whether APHIS, ARS, and FSIS had developed plans and initiated actions to prevent, detect, and respond to agroterrorism.⁸⁶

To accomplish our objective, we performed the following procedures:

- Reviewed applicable legislation, regulations, Presidential directives, DHS guidance, and agency policies to identify responsibilities related to agroterrorism preparedness.
- Interviewed and submitted questions for written response to agency officials to obtain an understanding of their actions related to agroterrorism prevention, detection, and response.
- Evaluated documentation agencies provided related to vulnerability assessments to determine what actions they have taken to identify and address weaknesses related to agroterrorism preparedness.
- Identified programs or processes agencies had in place to detect pest or disease outbreaks or food contamination and determined if the agencies had made improvements or enhancements.
- Examined agency response plans to determine the types of incidents the plans were designed to address.
- Analyzed AARs and corrective action tracking documents from exercises related to agroterrorism preparedness to determine what actions agencies took based on exercise outcomes.
- Obtained information on training courses offered or completed by the agencies to determine if courses were related to agroterrorism preparedness.
- Reviewed agencies' procedures for communication and outreach to other agencies, States, local governments, or the public related to agroterrorism preparedness.
- Evaluated each agency's processes for providing information to OHS regarding the HSPD-9 tracking document, SAR, and SSP.
- Discussed our findings and recommendations with APHIS, ARS, FSIS, and OHS officials.

During the course of our fieldwork, we focused on the existence of documents (for example, response plans) and did not perform in-depth evaluations of individual documents to assess their adequacy, completeness, or effectiveness.

We conducted this performance audit 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

⁸⁶ We primarily reviewed information from 2011 through 2017, but we accepted documentation prior to 2011 if it was relevant to our audit objectives. For example, we reviewed vulnerability assessment information from 2003 in order to obtain a complete understanding of this process.

based on our audit objective. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective.

Abbreviations

AAR	after-action report
APHIS	Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
ARS	Agricultural Research Service
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DM	Departmental Manual
EMSSD	Emergency Management, Safety, and Security Division
FSIS	Food Safety and Inspection Service
FY	fiscal year
GAO	Government Accountability Office
HSEEP	Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program
HSPD	Homeland Security Presidential Directive
NPAG	New Pest Advisory Group
OHS	Office of Homeland Security
OIG	Office of Inspector General
PPD	Presidential Policy Directive
PPQ	Plant Protection and Quarantine
RIRA	Risk Identification and Risk Assessment
SAR	Sector Critical Infrastructure Protection Annual Report
SSP	Sector-Specific Plan
USDA	Department of Agriculture
VS	Veterinary Services

**AGENCY
RESPONSES TO AUDIT REPORT**



Animal and Plant
Health
Inspection
Service

TO: Gil H. Harden
Assistant Inspector General
for Audit

Office of the
Administrator

FROM: Kevin Shea
Administrator /S/

1400
Independence
Ave, SW
Room 312-E
Washington, DC
20250

SUBJECT: APHIS Response and Request for Management Decisions
on the Office of Inspector General (OIG) Draft Report
“USDA Agency Activities for Agroterrorism Prevention,
Detection, and Response” (50701-01-21)

Thank you for the opportunity for the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to comment on this draft report. We have restated the five Recommendations made to APHIS and have provided information on our planned corrective actions.

Recommendation 1: Revise the agency’s current process to respond to information requests to include a step to compile completed agroterrorism preparedness actions throughout the year and planned activities for future periods.

APHIS Response: APHIS agrees with this Recommendation. APHIS will develop and implement a process to proactively collect information to respond to information needs regarding HSPD-9 implementation, the Sector Annual Report (SAR), and the Sector-Specific Plan (SSP) following receipt of the procedure and standard format from USDA OHS. APHIS anticipates receiving the standard format and procedure from OHS by August 15, 2018. If the information is received by August 15, 2018, APHIS will implement an Agency-level process to collect this information by December 31, 2018.

Recommendation 4: Identify actions the agency performs that can serve as vulnerability assessments for HSPD-9 compliance. Include these actions in the annual report to OHS on agroterrorism preparedness.

APHIS agrees with this Recommendation. APHIS has identified actions that it performs that meet the definitions of vulnerability assessments for HSPD-9 compliance. APHIS conducts risk identifications and risk assessments for emerging and foreign animal diseases, for those diseases listed in footnote 56. These actions meet the DHS vulnerability assessment definitions because APHIS utilizes them to identify potential animal disease hazards that have a significant effect on U.S. agricultural assets.

APHIS also produces national plant pest risk assessments, conducted by its New Pest Advisory Group, that identify potential hazards which could be introduced and have a significant effect on U.S. agricultural. These activities meet the DHS vulnerability assessment definitions because APHIS utilizes them to identify potential plant disease hazards that have a significant effect on U.S. agricultural assets.

By July 31, 2019, APHIS will include these actions in our annual report to the Office of Homeland Security (OHS) in accordance with OHS' guidance. APHIS may further modify the actions and information it reports in following years, based on guidance and requests from OHS.

Recommendation 5: Revise processes for products considered to be vulnerability assessments to (a) update them every 2 years or document the determination why an update was not needed, and (b) regularly assess and update the status of efforts to mitigate vulnerabilities and to address previous recommendations.

APHIS Response: APHIS agrees with this Recommendation. Many of APHIS' risk assessments for animal disease pathogens are developed as one-time analyses. Due to the nature of evolving animal disease threats, risk assessments do not typically require or lend themselves to being updated. By July 31, 2019, APHIS will formally document the criteria and revise internal processes to determine the frequency, if any, for updating these national risk assessments. APHIS will also revise processes to track assessment updates and actions to mitigate vulnerabilities identified by an assessment. APHIS will further revise its processes, as needed, in accordance with any changes in guidance from OHS based on the actions OHS is undertaking as a result of OIG's completed audit work on OHS agroterrorism activities, by July 31, 2019.

By July 31, 2019, APHIS will formally document the criteria and revise internal processes to determine the frequency, if any, for updating these national risk assessments for both animal and plant diseases. APHIS will also revise processes to track assessment updates and actions to mitigate vulnerabilities identified by an assessment. APHIS will further revise its processes, as needed, in accordance with any changes in guidance from OHS based on the actions OHS is undertaking as a result of OIG's completed audit work on OHS agroterrorism activities.

Recommendation 9: PPQ needs to develop and implement a process to track and annually report on the implementation status of corrective actions based on actual incident responses or exercises.

APHIS Response: APHIS agrees with this Recommendation. APHIS will develop a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) on the process for tracking and annually reporting on the implementation status of corrective actions based on actual plant disease emergency outbreaks. This SOP will also provide guidance on including resolutions to the corrective actions as a part of the after-action report (AAR). We will have this SOP developed and implemented by December 31, 2018. For exercises, PPQ will include a process to track and annually report on the implementation status of corrective actions in its training and exercise plan issued by our Professional Development Center by December 31, 2018. We will design our process using the Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program methodology for corrective actions.

Recommendation 10: PPQ needs to develop and implement a process to create AARs for tabletop exercises.

APHIS Response: APHIS agrees with this Recommendation. APHIS will develop and implement a process to create AARs for tabletop exercises by December 31, 2018.

In closing, thank you for your review of APHIS' activities on agroterrorism prevention, detection, and response. If you have any questions or if there is any further information we can provide, please let us know.



SUBJECT: USDA Agency Activities for Agroterrorism Prevention, Detection, and Response

TO: Gil H. Harden
Assistant Inspector General for Audit
Office of the Inspector General

Lynn Moaney
Deputy Chief Financial Officer
Office of the Chief Financial Officer

FROM: Lisa A. Baldus /s/
Associate Deputy Administrator

The Agricultural Research Service (ARS) appreciates the thoughtful recommendations in Audit Report 50701-0001-21 – USDA Agency Activities for Agroterrorism Prevention, Detection, and Response. ARS looks forward to quickly implementing the recommendations in the report. The following are ARS' specific responses to audit Recommendations 2, 6, 7 and 11.

Finding 1: Agencies Need to Improve Their Processes to Compile Information on Agroterrorism Preparedness

Recommendation 2 (to ARS)

Formally document the agency's current process to respond to information requests and revise it to include a step to compile completed agroterrorism preparedness actions throughout the year and planned activities for future periods.

ARS Response:

ARS has responded to Departmental requests for agroterrorism-related information (data calls) on an annual basis. The Department of Agriculture, Office of Homeland Security (OHS) provides these data call requests to us. With changes over the past several years, in the content and format related to Homeland Security/Agroterrorism, the timing of the data calls from OHS has been variable.

ARS agrees with this Recommendation. ARS will meet with OHS to build a reporting calendar and coordinate report requirements. This will form the basis of ARS' process to respond to information requests and ensure a timely and coordinated response at both the agency and the Departmental level. By August 31, 2019, ARS will develop and implement an Agroterrorism Reporting SOP to compile completed agroterrorism preparedness actions throughout the year and planned activities for future periods.

Finding 2: Agencies Need to Improve How They Communicate and Track Vulnerability Assessments

Recommendation 6 (to ARS)

Identify actions the agency performs that can serve as vulnerability assessments for HSPD-9 compliance. Include these actions in the annual report to OHS on agroterrorism preparedness.

ARS Response:

ARS agrees with this Recommendation. ARS works with other agencies in the performance of vulnerability assessment activities. ARS conducts gap analyses related to animal diseases, evaluation of emerging plant diseases, and helping to develop plant disease risk maps. Because ARS is a research agency and is typically working with a regulatory or action agency, ARS conducts these assessments at the request of another agency. In addition, during the 5-year project planning process, ARS will identify vulnerabilities to be addressed in research projects in animal health, food safety, and plant disease (National Programs 103, 108 and 303) and include these vulnerabilities in the HSPD-9 annual report.

ARS will meet with OHS to develop and implement an Agroterrorism Reporting SOP by August 31, 2019, which will include a section to report on progress made to address vulnerabilities identified for research in NPs 103, 108 and 303 to be included in the HSPD-9 annual report.

Recommendation 7 (to ARS)

Revise processes for products considered to be vulnerability assessments to (a) update them every 2 years or document the determination why an update was not needed, and (b) regularly assess and update the status of efforts to mitigate vulnerabilities and implement previously recommended corrective actions.

ARS Response:

ARS agrees with this Recommendation to update assessments every 2 years, however, ARS vulnerability assessment activities are generally done at the request of a regulatory or action agency. We generally conduct these assessments with the timing determined by the requesting agency. Furthermore, the implementation of recommendations is typically dependent on action by another agency, not ARS.

ARS will develop and implement an Agroterrorism Reporting SOP by August 31, 2019, to include biennial review of three research programs: animal health, food safety, and plant disease (National Programs 103, 108, and 303) to assess and update vulnerability assessments, as it applies to HSPD-9 reporting.

Finding 3: Agencies Need to Improve How They Track Corrective Actions from Exercises and Incident Responses

Recommendation 11 (to ARS)

Develop and implement a process to obtain AARs from exercises ARS officials participated in and review the AARs to identify deficiencies or issues experienced in the exercises that ARS can help address through future research. Include a step in the process to assess annually if ARS has initiated research to help address deficiencies or issues experienced in previous exercises.

ARS Response:

ARS agrees with this Recommendation. ARS will involve the ARS Office of Homeland Security (AOHS) in all vulnerability exercises. The AOHS will follow up to obtain the AAR as a standard process and forward the report to the Office of National Programs. The Office of National Programs will work with AOHS to develop and implement an Agroterrorism Reporting SOP by August 31, 2019, to assess annually if ARS has initiated research to help address deficiencies or issues experienced in previous exercises.



United States Department of Agriculture

Food Safety and
Inspection Service

1400 Independence
Avenue, SW,
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20250

TO: Gil H. Harden
Assistant Inspector General
Office of Inspector General

FROM: Paul Kiecker / s / **July 11, 2018**
Acting Administrator
Food Safety and Inspection Service

SUBJECT: Office of Inspector General (OIG) Official Draft Report –
USDA Agency Activities for Agroterrorism Prevention,
Detection, and Response, Audit Number 50701-0001-21

We appreciate the opportunity to review and comment on this Official Draft report. The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) reviewed the Official Draft report and presents its response and action it has already taken to each recommendation.

FSIS' Response to OIG's Recommendations

Recommendation 3:

Formally document the Agency's current process to respond to information requests and revise it to include a step to compile completed agroterrorism preparedness actions throughout the year and planned activities for future periods.

FSIS Response:

FSIS developed and is currently implementing standard operating procedures for responding to information requests and other food defense/agroterrorism reporting. These procedures, titled "Standard Operating Procedures for FSIS Information Sharing with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Coordination and other U.S. Government Agencies," were put into place in December 2017.

FSIS will leverage existing internal planning and reporting efforts, such as those related to strategic and budgetary activities, to track and compile planned and completed agroterrorism preparedness activities throughout the year. This step will be added to the existing standard operating procedures.

Estimated Completion Date: October 31, 2018

Recommendation 8:

Revise vulnerability assessment processes to regularly assess and update the status of efforts to mitigate vulnerabilities and previously recommended corrective actions.

FSIS Response:

FSIS implemented a new food defense task in April 2017, which allows inspection program personnel to collect information regarding food defense practices being implemented by industry. The task questions were developed based on findings from

vulnerability assessments. The task data are, and will continue to be, analyzed to determine how mitigation strategies identified during vulnerability assessments are being implemented by industry. FSIS also plans to review the task data to evaluate the status of corrective actions from previous vulnerability assessments. These procedures will be incorporated into standard operating procedures for performing FSIS vulnerability assessments.

Estimated Completion Date: December 31, 2018

Recommendation 12:

Document the process to track and annually report on the implementation status of corrective actions based on exercises.

FSIS Response:

In December 2017, FSIS implemented a new method of tracking Improvement Plans for After Action/Improvement Reports. Standard operating procedures are being developed to explain how the tool is used and methodology for annually reporting implementation status of corrective actions from exercises.

Estimated Completion Date: December 31, 2018

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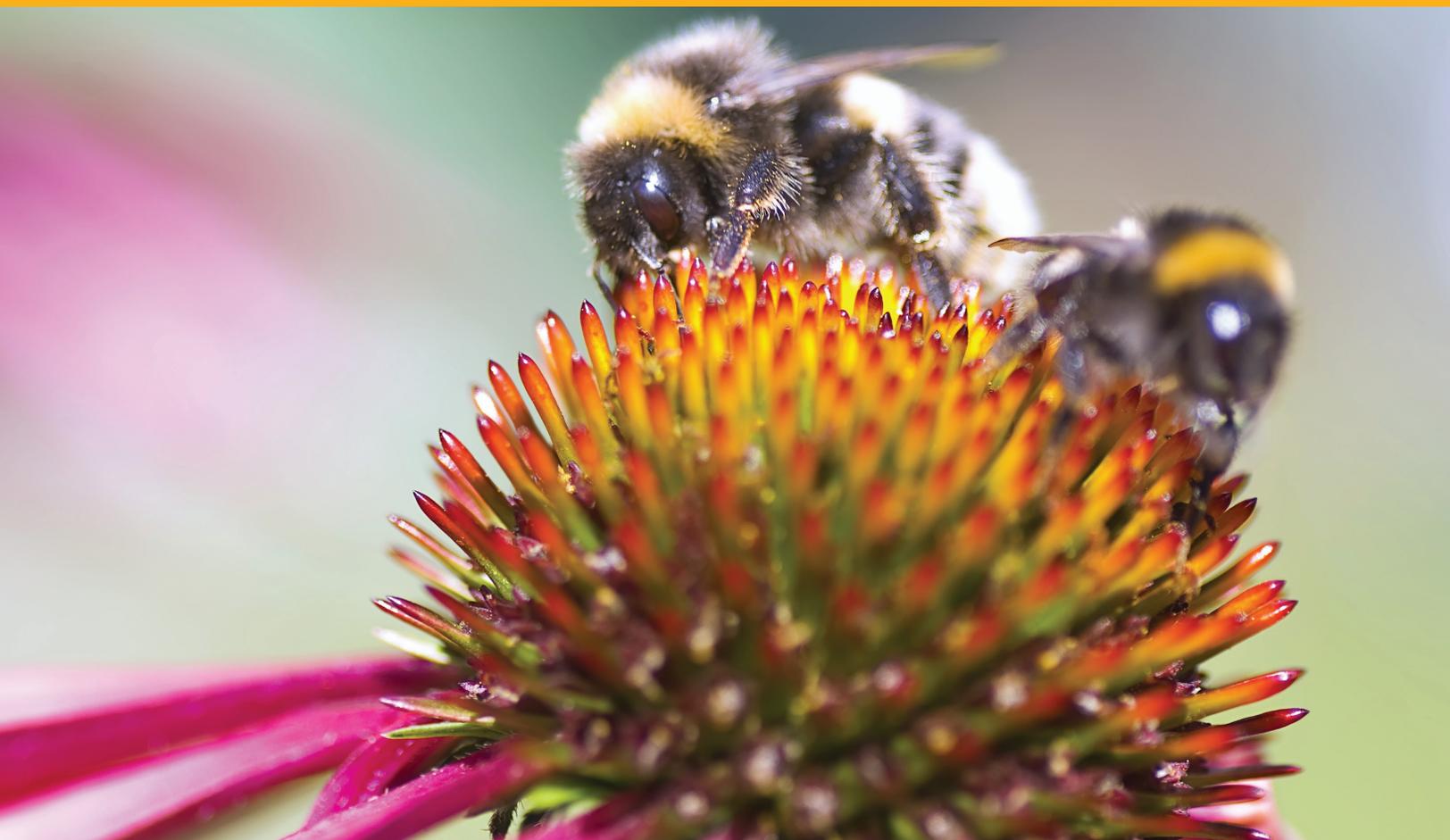
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