U.S. Department of Agriculture

Office of Inspector General

# Assessment of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Disaster Response Capabilities

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Report 42099-4-HQ
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

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REPLY TO
ATTN OF: 42099-4-HQ

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FROM: Gil H. Harden /s/
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SUBJECT: Assessment of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Disaster Response Capabilities (Assessment Report 42099-4-HQ)

This report presents the results of our assessment of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) disaster response capabilities. We performed our assessment as part of a pilot program instituted by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Inspector General (IG). The DHS IG provided 14 "researchable questions" related to DHS' National Response Framework Emergency Support Function (ESF) 11 "Agriculture and Natural Resources" to be answered during our review. Our objective was to obtain information to answer these questions through interviews with USDA personnel and review of documentation provided by the Department and its agencies.

We concluded that USDA and its agencies coordinated activities and performed primary and support duties as outlined in ESF 11. Accordingly, we are not making any recommendations at this time.

We appreciate the courtesies and cooperation extended to us during the review.

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## *Assessment of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Disaster Response Capabilities (Assessment Report 42099-4-HQ)*

## Executive Summary

According to the draft of *An IG's Guide for Assessing Federal Response Capabilities:*[1]

> The National Response Framework (NRF) was released by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in January 2008 to guide how the nation conducts all hazards response. It is built upon a scalable, flexible, and adaptable coordinating structure to align key roles and responsibilities across the nation, linking all levels of Government, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector. It includes specific authorities and best practices for managing incidents that range from the serious but purely local, to large scale terrorist attacks or catastrophic disasters. It underscores that Government executives, private sector and nongovernmental organization leaders, and emergency management practitioners across the nation must understand domestic incident response roles, responsibilities, and relationships.
>
> The Emergency Support Function (ESF) annexes contained in the NRF provide the structure for coordinating Federal interagency support in response to an incident. They represent 15 functional groupings that are frequently used to provide Federal support to states and federal-to-federal support, both for declared disasters and emergencies.

The NRF established the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) as the coordinator as well as a Primary and Support agency for ESF 11, "Agriculture and Natural Resources."[2] As such, USDA is charged with management oversight for ESF 11. USDA has ongoing responsibilities throughout the preparedness, response, and recovery phases of incident management.

We performed our assessment as part of a pilot program instituted by the DHS Office of Inspector General (OIG). The DHS OIG provided 14 "researchable questions" to be answered during our review. Our objective was to obtain information to answer these questions through interviews with USDA personnel responsible for ESF 11 and analysis of documentation provided by the Department and its agencies. Our review was for the limited purpose described above and would not necessarily identify all deficiencies in internal controls.

We found that USDA appropriately coordinated activities under ESF 11. Furthermore, we noted that impacted USDA agencies (Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Food and Nutrition Service, and Food and Safety Inspection Service) properly functioned in assigned roles of coordinating, Primary and Support agencies in accordance with NRF guidelines.

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[1] Draft "An IG's Guide for Assessing Federal Response Capabilities" dated May 2010, issued by the Emergency Management Work Group of the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency.

[2] Roles assigned to the coordinator do not overlap with the roles of primary or support agencies.

## *Background and Objectives*

### Background

According to the draft of *An IG's Guide for Assessing Federal Response Capabilities* (see footnote 1):

> The National Response Framework (NRF) was released by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in January 2008 to guide how the nation conducts all hazards response.
>
> The Emergency Support Function (ESF) annexes contained in the NRF provide the structure for coordinating Federal interagency support in response to an incident. They represent 15 functional groupings that are frequently used to provide Federal support to states and federal-to-federal support, both for declared disasters and emergencies.
>
> Each ESF is comprised of a coordinator, along with Primary and Support agencies. For ESF 11, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is the coordinator as well as a Primary and Support agency. The coordinator for each ESF is charged with management oversight for that particular ESF. The coordinator has ongoing responsibilities throughout the preparedness, response, and recovery phases of incident management.
>
> Responsibilities of the ESF Coordinator include:
>
> - Coordinating before, during, and after an incident, including pre-incident planning and coordination;
> - maintaining ongoing contact with ESF Primary and Support agencies;
> - conducting periodic ESF meetings and conference calls;
> - coordinating efforts with corresponding private sector organizations; and
> - coordinating ESF activities relating to catastrophic incident planning and critical infrastructure preparedness, as appropriate.
>
> An ESF primary agency is a Federal agency with significant authorities, roles, resources, or capabilities for a particular function within an ESF. When an ESF is activated in response to an incident, responsibilities of the primary agency include:
>
> - Supporting the ESF coordinator and coordinating closely with the other primary and support agencies;
> - orchestrating Federal support within their functional area for an affected State;
> - providing staff for the operations functions at fixed and field facilities;
> - notifying and requesting assistance from support agencies; and

- Managing mission assignments and coordinating with support agencies, as well as appropriate State officials, operations centers, and agencies.

A support agency is an entity that has specific capabilities or resources that support the Primary Agency in executing the ESF mission. When an ESF is activated, responsibilities of the support agency include:

- Conducting operations, when requested by DHS or designated ESF primary agency, consistent with their own authority and resources, except as directed otherwise pursuant to sections 402, 403, and 502 of the Stafford Act, which authorizes the President to provide financial and other assistance to State and local governments following Presidential emergency or major disaster declarations;

- participating in planning for short and long-term incident management and recovery operations and the development of supporting operational plans; and

- assisting in the conduct of situational assessments.

NRF annex for ESF 11 describes five primary functions: providing nutrition assistance, responding to animal and plant diseases and pests, ensuring the safety and security of the commercial food supply, protecting natural and cultural resources and historic properties, and providing for the safety and well-being of household pets.

## Objectives

We performed our assessment as part of a pilot program instituted by the DHS' Inspector General (IG). The DHS IG provided 14 "researchable questions" to be answered during our review. Our objective was to obtain information to answer these questions through interviews with USDA personnel responsible for ESF 11 and analysis of documentation provided by the Department and its agencies.

## *Scope and Methodology*

The scope of our review was Departmentwide and covered USDA ESF 11 activities from January 2009 through March 2010. We followed applicable *Government Auditing Standards* in performing this assessment. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our conclusions based on our objectives. Fieldwork for this assessment was performed in March and April 2010. We conducted our assessment at the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service, Food Safety Inspection Service, and Food and Nutrition Service located in Washington D.C. To accomplish our audit objectives, we interviewed key Departmental and agency personnel, and evaluated documentation provided by the Department and its agencies supporting activities performed to carry out its responsibilities under ESF 11.

## *Abbreviations*

APHIS ..... Animal Plant Health Inspection Service
COOP ..... Continuity of Operations Plan
DHS..... Department of Homeland Security
ESF..... Emergency Support Function
FFIS..... Foundation Financial Information System
FEMA ..... Federal Emergency Management Agency
FNS ..... Food and Nutrition Service
FSIS..... Food Safety Inspection Service
GPS ..... Global Positioning System
ICS ..... Incident Command System
IG ..... Inspector General
JFO..... Joint Field Office
NRCC..... National Response Coordination Center
NRF..... National Response Framework
OIG ..... Office of Inspector General
RRCC..... Regional Response Coordination Center
TTX..... table top exercise
USDA..... U.S. Department of Agriculture

## *Exhibit A: Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Inspector General (IG) Researchable Questions and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Office of Inspector General (OIG) Position*

(Researchable Questions are in bold, OIG responses are italicized)

**Questions 1 through 3 pertain to Emergency Support Function (ESF) Coordinators. The Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) functions as USDA's Coordinating and Primary Agency.**

**Researchable Question 1:**

**To what extent and in what manner did USDA coordinate with other Primary and Support agencies: (a) before an incident (including pre-incident planning), (b) during an incident, and (c) after an incident?**

> *We found that USDA coordinated a wide variety of ESF 11 activities with the Department of Interior and the support agencies (a) before an incident (including pre-incident planning), (b) during an incident, and (c) after an incident. Before incidents occurred, USDA was involved in coordinating pre-incident activities such as planning, exercises, training, workgroups, and periodic conference calls. During an incident, ESF 11 was activated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and USDA served as the sole ESF coordinator for ESF 11 activities, increasing the frequency of communications with other ESF 11 agencies, including daily conference calls. After an incident, after-action reviews were conducted, and an after-action report including lessons learned was produced.*

**Researchable Question 2:**

**To what extent did USDA coordinate with private sector organizations to identify and maximize use of private sector resources in response to a threat or incident?**

> *We found that USDA coordinated with a variety of private sector organizations to identify and maximize use of private sector resources in response to a threat or incident. Documentation showed USDA's direct involvement with a variety of private sector organizations in exercises, training events, conferences, workgroups, and periodic conference calls.*

**Researchable Question 3:**

**To what extent did USDA coordinate ESF activities for catastrophic incident planning (e.g., National Planning Scenarios) and critical infrastructure preparedness, as appropriate?**

> *We found that USDA coordinated a variety of ESF 11 activities in developing various plans, regularly attending meetings and performing exercises as part of planning for catastrophic incidents. USDA also collaborated with FEMA on various plans and exercises regarding catastrophic incidents. In addition, for the agriculture-related*

*National Planning Scenarios for catastrophic incidents, USDA provided documentation showing it was directly involved in plan development, exercises, training, and workgroups. Based on our review, we concluded USDA has coordinated a wide variety of ESF activities for catastrophic incident planning (e.g. National Planning Scenarios) and critical infrastructure preparedness.*

**Researchable Questions 4 through 9 pertain to ESF Primary Agencies.**

**Researchable Question 4:**

**To what extent and in what manner did USDA coordinate with the ESF coordinator, Primary and Support agencies, State officials, operations centers, State agencies, and the private sector?**

*We found that USDA continuously coordinated with State officials, operations centers, and State Agencies in a variety of ways. USDA's coordination ranged from observation to full participation in meetings, training, participation on advisory and planning groups, drafting language for mission assignments, as well as full and partial participation in State exercises (including funding and collaborating exercises in select states).*

**Researchable Question 5:**

**To what extent was USDA prepared to provide trained staff for operations functions, such as supporting interagency emergency response and support teams, at fixed and field facilities?**

*We found that USDA was prepared to provide trained staff for operations functions to the extent necessary in relationship to ESF 11, at both fixed and field facilities.*

*Required training was completed by support staff. Additionally, this trained staff was divided into teams, and served on a rotational basis to ensure support staff was always available when needed.*

**Researchable Question 6:**

**To what extent and in what manner did USDA conduct situational and periodic readiness assessments? How often have they been coordinated, and how have findings been applied?**

*We found that USDA conducted situational and periodic readiness assessments through meetings, table top exercises (TTX), full scale exercises, and activations. The amount of assessments varied; however, from January 2009 through March 2010, 21 assessments were completed.*

*Findings from completed assessments were documented in after-action reports. Findings have resulted in standardized communication through daily reports, standardized ESF 11 Desk Officer Training, and revised roles and responsibilities of National Response Coordination Center (NRCC) Team Members. These findings were applied to procedures for carrying out ESF 11 activities as well as future assessments.*

**Researchable Question 7:**

**To what extent had USDA identified new equipment or capabilities required to prevent or respond to new or emerging threats and hazards, or to improve the ability to address existing threats?**

*We found that USDA was staffed and equipped to functionally respond to incidents. ESF 11 agencies used exercise reports and after-action reports for incidents to access the capabilities for strengths and areas needing improvement. Meetings were held to share information with support agencies, States, and non-governmental organizations. We concluded that USDA continually assessed their new equipment needs and capacities by conducting exercises, preparing after-action reports, and sharing information with other organizations.*

**Researchable Question 8:**

**To what extent had USDA executed contracts and procured goods and services needed to fulfill its ESF role?**

*We found that USDA's primary role was to provide technical assistance; not to execute contracts to procure goods and services. We noted two isolated cases where USDA executed contracts during our review. As a result of 2008 flooding that occurred in Iowa, a contract for carcass disposal was executed in response to a FEMA mission assignment. USDA also contracted for training to prepare employees for response activities. USDA was in the process of executing a contract for desk officer training. We concluded that USDA's response activities rarely required execution of contracts and procurement of goods and services.*

**Researchable Question 9:**

**To what extent was USDA prepared to manage mission assignments and ensure financial and property accountability for ESF activities?**

*We found that USDA was prepared to manage mission assignments and ensure financial and property accountability for ESF 11 activities. APHIS staff included a full time employee to manage mission assignments. Responsibilities included review of accounting codes, tracking the costs, reviewing and submitting information to FEMA, and entering information into the Department's Foundation Financial Information System (FFIS). To ensure that the total costs did not exceed the limits set for the particular mission assignment, each agency was responsible for submitting ESF 11 costs to APHIS so that the total costs for the disaster response could be tracked and subsequently entered in to FFIS. FSIS also maintained procedures to ensure financial accountability.*

*APHIS had several full-time employees that were trained, positioned, and functionally equipped to manage mission assignments and ensure financial accountability. APHIS maintained a spreadsheet listing contacts to initiate responses. When a disaster occurred, APHIS had six dispatchers that used the Resource Ordering and Status System to deploy staff. FSIS had procedures in place setting forth the roles and responsibilities for*

*managing mission assignments. The Food and Nutrition Services' (FNS) normal operations included providing food in the event of a disaster; therefore, it did not have separate regulations for ESF 11 functions. For the APHIS full-time ESF 11 employees, the property needed for disaster response activities was assigned to the employees. For non-ESF 11 employees, property needed for ESF 11 response was the responsibility of each agency and was accounted for as part of their normal operations.*

**Researchable Question 10 pertains to Coordinating and Primary Departments and Agencies.**

**Researchable Question 10:**

**To what extent did USDA plan for short and long-term incident management and recovery operations?**

*We found that USDA had adequately planned for short and long-term incident management and recovery operations. The ESF 11 coordinators completed Incident Command System (ICS) training and various DHS training courses. The USDA ESF 11 agencies participated in developing various response plans, meetings, and exercises. They participated in National Alliance of State Animal and Agricultural Emergency Programs working group meetings. Additionally, USDA was in the process of executing a contract to conduct a Desk Officer Training Academy in June 2010.*

**Researchable Questions 11-14 pertain to Support Agencies (FSIS and FNS functioned primarily as support agencies for USDA).**

**Researchable Question 11:**

**To what extent had USDA's support agencies identified trained personnel, equipment, or other resources support to conduct operations when requested by DHS or the designated ESF primary agency?**

*We found that FNS had trained staff to support ESF 11 at FEMA's NRCC and over 100 staff collectively across the seven FNS regions to support Regional Response Coordination Centers (RRCC) and Joint Field Offices (JFO), as needed. Staff participated in annual regional and national training conferences as well as on-line training to assure preparedness for activation and response.*

*We selected a nonstatistical sample of FNS employees and requested training certificates for those individuals. FNS provided documentation showing completion of the required training courses for the selected individuals.*

*In addition, we found that FNS also acquired Global Positioning Systems (GPS) for its personnel that assisted in areas where severe structural damage prevents them from getting to the places in need during a disaster. FNS realized the need for GPS after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when most of the traffic signs and landmarks were destroyed.*

*FSIS indicated that it provided personnel to staff the NRCC, RRCC, and JFO. FSIS personnel chosen to assist the NRCC have either completed or are in the process of completing several of the suggested FEMA courses including ICS 100, 200, 300, and desk officer training. The USDA and FSIS ESF 11 Coordinators track this training as it is completed. FSIS personnel assisting at the RRCCs and JFOs receive desk officer training as it becomes available.*

*FSIS maintained a list of training completed for dedicated ESF 11 personnel. This list included FNS and FSIS employees trained to assist the NRCCs, RRCCs, or JFOs. We selected a nonstatistical sample of FSIS employees and requested training certificates for those individuals. FSIS provided documentation showing completion of the required training courses for the selected individuals. FSIS maintained satellite phones, GETS cards, blackberries, and recorders for use when responding to emergencies. This provided FSIS the ability to communicate during significant incidents disrupting normal communications.*

**Researchable Question 12:**

**To what extent had USDA support agencies participated in planning for short and long-term incident management and recovery operations and the development of supporting operational plans?**

*We found that FSIS had a Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP), an All Hazards Response Plan, Pandemic Plan, and Avian Influenza Plan that were provided to USDA. Furthermore, FSIS provided input to FEMA on the Biological CONPLAN and Hurricane Planning and USDA on the Radiological Plan, COOP, and National Disaster Recovery Framework. FSIS participated in the APHIS National and Regional Meetings and ESF 11 partner meetings.*

*FNS worked in coordination with Federal, State, and nongovernmental partners to manage incidents through meetings and conference calls on a daily basis during responses and periodically during the transition to recovery. FNS' role in recovery was more limited as it involved referring and transitioning disaster survivors to the regular FNS nutrition assistance programs. FNS worked closely with State and local partners on these matters.*

**Researchable Question 13:**

**To what extent did USDA support agencies assist in the conduct of situational assessments and provide input to periodic readiness assessments? How often have they been coordinated and how have findings been applied?**

*We found that FNS annually participated in the National Level Exercise, the National Hurricane Exercise and an internal FNS exercise to assess readiness. All exercises included an after-action assessment to evaluate response and recommend improvements. FNS also assessed its disaster response to recent incidents and developed a "lessons learned" report that is used internally for planning and was shared with State partners as a technical assistance.*

*FSIS conducted internal exercises to test internal procedures in responding to significant incidents. FSIS personnel participated in external exercises designed by other agencies and departments and hosted exercises involving external participants from State, local, tribal governments, industry, and consumer groups. FSIS hosted a TTX "Operation Connect" that included participants from USDA, DHS, and FEMA. FSIS also participated in a TTX "Fate" cosponsored by DHS, the Environmental Protection Agency, USDA, and the Food and Drug Administration.*

*FSIS followed up on issues identified during exercises to ensure it was prepared to respond to a significant incident. FSIS implemented these changes after exercises and significant incidents. FSIS provided copies of its Matrix, Training and Exercise section for the last six months. As an example from the matrix provided, FSIS completed its ESF 11 exercise which tested the utility of the National Biosurveillance Information System to characterize situational awareness, guide response, share information in the event of a food incident and the coordination of response efforts during an incident involving the safety of the meat, poultry, and processed egg products.*

**Researchable Question 14:**

**To what extent did USDA support agencies identify new equipment or capabilities required to prevent or respond to new or emerging threats and hazards, or to improve the ability to address existing threats?**

*Both FSIS and FNS officials stated that the agencies identified new equipment and capabilities using after-action assessments for an actual incident and readiness exercises conducted annually with FEMA and periodically with internal staff or other Federal agencies. For example, after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, FNS realized the need for GPS for the disaster team because many street signs and landmarks were down. FNS now maintains GPS for their teams during emergency support activations. As another example, FSIS provided a Significant Incident Response Directive which outlined procedures for responding to public health or food defense incidents. This directive is revised as needed to ensure FSIS' response capabilities are current based upon lessons learned during internal and external exercises.*