



GAO Report – Better Outreach, Collaboration, and Information Needed to Help Protect Workers at Meat and Poultry Plants

WHAT WE KNOW

There are almost 500,000 working people in the meat and poultry processing industry. Many of these workers are vulnerable because of their economic or immigration status, and their concerns about difficult working conditions often go unheard or unseen by the government agencies charged with protecting them.

KEY FINDINGS

Workers at many plants are not able to take restroom breaks and fear speaking up will cost them their job.

- Workers in five states told the Government Accountability Office (GAO) that while they are on the production line, their requests to use the bathroom are often delayed or denied. GAO reported that some workers suffered negative health effects, such as kidney problems, as a result of having to wait too long to use the restroom.

Workers who are injured on the job often receive delayed or inadequate medical attention.

- Workers' requests for medical care are sometimes ignored by plant management, or they receive medical care that is insufficient. At one plant, an Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) hazard alert letter included the story of a worker who made over 90 visits to the nursing station before receiving a referral to an outside physician.
- Management sometimes penalizes workers for seeking medical attention, including by reprimanding or firing them. GAO identified a similar trend in its [2016 report](#) on the meat and poultry processing industry.

There are inadequate worker protections from toxic chemicals because of patchwork review of chemicals and a lack of inter-agency communication about their risks.

- GAO found that workers in poultry processing plants are regularly exposed to chemicals that may or may not undergo a federal review of the risks they pose to worker safety and health.
- The USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) receives detailed information from chemical producers about chemicals submitted for USDA approval. However, this information is not shared with OSHA, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), at the local level with FSIS in-plant inspectors, or with plant management.

Some poultry plants in the southeast are refusing OSHA access to expand its inspections, which prevents OSHA from fulfilling its mission to protect workers.

- OSHA was denied access to inspect meat and poultry plants fifteen times in 2016. In contrast, OSHA experienced only sixteen denials of entry into poultry plants in the preceding *decade*.
- Each denial of entry occurred when OSHA moved to expand a complaint inspection to incorporate its regional emphasis program for the poultry industry. The regional emphasis program can include the investigation of amputations, slips and falls, and ergonomic hazards that are particularly prevalent in the poultry industry.
- Although OSHA is litigating its authority for right of access to conduct inspections, OSHA's response to the GAO report states that OSHA does not routinely ask questions about any potential hazards that go beyond the scope of a complaint inspection, unless those hazards are in plain sight. This indicates that OSHA is narrowing the expansion of inspections to only cover visible hazards, limiting the agency's capability to use special emphasis programs to inspect for other plant hazards.

GAO'S RECOMMENDATIONS

- OSHA should interview workers away from their workplaces to encourage them to speak up about restroom access. By asking workers specifically about this issue, OSHA will be able to better understand the scope of the problem.
- OSHA should update its 1999 guidance on plant health unit management to make sure workers receive timely, quality care.
- OSHA and FSIS should work together to review and update their 1994 Memorandum of Understanding to maximize collaborative opportunities to protect workers.
- FSIS should develop a process to share chemical safety review information with OSHA, NIOSH, FSIS inspectors, and plant management.
- NIOSH should conduct a study of the interaction between peracetic acid and other chemicals used in poultry and meat processing plants to determine the combined effects on workers who come into contact with them daily.