

Questions Submitted by the Union of Concerned Scientists

Senate Agriculture Committee USDA Secretary Confirmation Hearing

USDA Science and Scientists

On the campaign trail and since the election, President Trump has promised to fire government scientists and dismantle science agencies. This matters because when science is sidelined, people get hurt. USDA science agencies and scientists help farmers, policymakers, and the public better understand a wide range of food and farming topics and point to solutions to key challenges facing farmers and rural communities. Yet the previous Trump administration buried a USDA report on climate change and agriculture, initially nominated a uniquely unqualified non-scientist to the position of USDA Chief Scientist, and pursued an abrupt and disingenuous relocation of scientists and staff at the Economic Research Service and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture. According to the USDA Inspector General and the Government Accountability Office, the relocation violated the law and hobbled these science agencies, driving out more than half their employees, reducing their ability to produce research reports on important topics, and increasing the processing time for research grants.

- Will you commit to resist pressure to bury USDA data, silence its scientists, and suppress and censor USDA research?
- Will you insist on an appropriately credentialed scientist to lead the USDA's Research, Education and Economics (REE) mission area and fill the important role of USDA Chief Scientist?

Small Farms and Discrimination

Black, Indigenous, and other farmers of color have faced a documented history of discrimination and civil rights violations at the U.S. Department of Agriculture because of both systemic injustices and bad actors on the local level. These farmers were further burdened under the previous Trump administration, as assistance programs such as the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program and trade aid for farmers largely benefited the largest producers and companies while small operations, especially those run by socially disadvantaged farmers, faced obstacles accessing these programs.

In 2024, the USDA's Equity Commission concluded its congressionally mandated work to advise the department on ways to address inequitable access issues in its programs and services and strengthen accountability. The Commission's final report provided 66 recommendations to address documented historic discrimination and eliminate barriers to access, including the creation of an Office of Small Farms as "large operations receive the vast majority of USDA resources."

- Under your leadership, how will USDA work to protect, support, and improve access for small farms, beginning and young farmers, and other farmers who have been historically underserved and faced discrimination? How will you prioritize the unfinished work of implementing the Equity Commission's recommendations?
- Do you support the creation of an Office of Small Farms to improve coordination and access to programs and services for small farmers? If not, why not?

- What qualifications do you believe are necessary in a candidate for Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights at USDA? How will you improve the discrimination complaints process at the Department?

Conservation and Climate

Many of USDA's conservation-focused programs, including the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), are currently oversubscribed due to very high demand from farmers to participate in them, which outstrips the amount of funding available. As a result, many farmers who want to use conservation practices on their land are unable to enroll in these USDA programs.

- How should USDA further bolster and support these programs to enable them to help as many farmers as possible?
- How can Congress support these conservation programs as it begins to draft the next Farm Bill?
- Do you acknowledge that human-caused climate change is real and is already harming farmers, and that shifts in farming practices that build healthy soil can buffer farmland from flooding and drought, making farmers and our food supply more resilient?
- Given the strong interest in voluntary conservation practices—such as use of cover crops, no till, and techniques to prevent soil erosion—from American farmers, do you agree that USDA should continue its work to support and encourage the use of such practices to help farmers to build resilience against floods, drought, and extreme weather?

Food and Agricultural Workers

Agriculture and food workers are deemed essential employees, but these positions regularly rank among the most dangerous jobs in the country, lack many necessary protections and federal support, and have been traditionally excluded from USDA programs and services. For example, a [recent USDA report](#) found that “poultry establishments have failed to protect most workers from musculoskeletal disorders” (MSD) as 81 percent of workers in the jobs evaluated had an unacceptably high MSD risk. The American Rescue Plan Act provided support for agricultural employers in implementing robust labor standards to promote a safe, healthy work environment for agricultural workers, which became the Farm Labor Stabilization and Protection Pilot Grant Program. Further, bills introduced in the last Congress would expand the role and staff of the USDA Farmworker Coordinator and create an Office of the Farm and Food System Workforce to better meet the needs of these workers.

- How would you ensure that farm and food system workers are supported by the USDA under your leadership?
- Would you continue the Farm Labor Stabilization and Protection Pilot Grant Program or a similar effort?

- How will you approach protecting meat and poultry processing workers who have faced particularly hazardous working conditions, including faster line speeds under the previous Trump administration?

Local Foods

A major contributor to food insecurity is the lack of access to quality, nutritious foods, leading to higher risk of preventable chronic diseases, mental health issues, and stunted development and other disorders in children. Farmers' markets are a beneficial tool in promoting food security.

- How will the Department under your leadership support increased farmers' markets and other local food sources in order to combat food insecurity?

The Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) provides funding for state, tribal and territorial governments to purchase foods to help support local, regional and underserved producers to maintain and improve food and agricultural supply chain resiliency. Program participants have expressed how beneficial this program has been to support both their local communities and underserved farmers.

- Will you commit to continuing this program or a similar effort to strengthen local food supply chain resiliency?

Nutrition

The incoming Trump administration has expressed the desire to "Make America Healthy Again." Much of that depends on the nutritional value of the foods we eat. Reevaluating the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) every five years is essential in order to align benefits with current food costs, updated nutrition science, and economic conditions.

- Under your leadership, will you commit USDA to continuing the practice of re-evaluating the Thrifty Food Plan every five years, in order to assess how Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Plan (SNAP) benefits are calculated and to ensure that they are based on the most up-to-date health, scientific, and dietary guidelines?

Sustainable Nutrition Science

We know that food production, nutrition, impacts of extreme weather on farmland, and human health are deeply intertwined. However, federal investments, including investments made by USDA research programs, often fund research that analyzes these problems in silos.

- Under your leadership, how would you ensure that USDA is approaching the issues of food production, the environment, and nutrition from a systems-based interdisciplinary perspective as opposed to research that happens in an isolated manner within silos, in order to achieve the best results?