

REVIEW OF THE USDA REORGANIZATION PROPOSAL

HEARING BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY UNITED STATES SENATE ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS FIRST SESSION

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REVIEW OF THE USDA REORGANIZATION PROPOSAL

WEDNESDAY, JULY 30, 2025

U.S. SENATE
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 11:03 a.m., in Room 328A, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. John Boozman, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Boozman [presiding], Hoeven, Ernst, Hyde-Smith, Marshall, Tuberville, Justice, Fischer, Moran, Klobuchar, Bennet, Smith, Luján, Warnock, Welch, Fetterman, and Schiff.

STATEMENT OF HON. BOOZMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF ARKANSAS, CHAIRMAN, U.S. COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

Chairman BOOZMAN. Good morning and welcome. It is my privilege to call this hearing to order to review the USDA reorganization proposal.

I welcome our witness, Judge Stephen Vaden, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture. I appreciate your ability to appear before the Committee on such short notice and the opportunity to engage thoughtfully on the future of USDA and how it will continue to efficiently serve our farmers, ranchers, and rural communities.

Despite being at the helm for less than six months, Secretary Rollins has already made a significant and positive impact on the agriculture sector in rural America. I appreciate her commitment to serving our Nation's farmers, ranchers, and foresters. She has worked tirelessly to implement emergency economic assistance and supplemental disaster relief passed in December to ensure that American farmers and ranchers receive emergency assistance to keep their family farms in operation and to help them recover from natural disasters. She has championed provisions that bolster the farm safety net, crop insurance, research, our animal health infrastructure, and trade promotion programs Congress delivered in the One Big Beautiful Bill.

The Secretary has also taken action to defend American livestock against the growing threat of New World screwworm, as well as successfully reined in the highly pathogenic avian influenza outbreak that has significantly impacted poultry flocks and dairy operations across the U.S. She continues to be a voice for American agriculture and those who feed, clothe, and fuel our Nation.

Last week, Secretary Rollins announced a major reorganization of USDA. I appreciate the Secretary's emphasis on improving effec-

tiveness, accountability, enhancing services, reducing bureaucracy, and cutting waste. I support those goals. As we examine the proposal, we need to fully understand its implications for the people USDA serves, especially how reorganization will affect USDA's boots on the ground, presence in rural America, and delivery of essential services.

From its founding, USDA has been essential to American life, supporting farmers and ranchers, stewarding natural resources, investing in rural development, and advancing innovation in food and agriculture. As the Department evolves to meet 21st century challenges, it is important that any organization enhances its ability to deliver on these commitments. I share the Secretary's desire to ensure USDA operates efficiently, is a good steward of taxpayer dollars, and meets the needs of agriculture and rural America.

We must also prioritize what matters most to producers in rural communities: service, responsiveness, and results. USDA is often the most visible face of the Federal Government in rural America. That presence, whether through FSA offices, conservation staff, or rural development programs, needs to be preserved and empowered.

As we review this plan, I look forward to learning more about how this proposal strengthens the USDA's ability to deliver on the ground, support implementation of the farm bill, and serve as a reliable partner to people it was created to support.

Deputy Secretary Vaden, I recognize you have only been in the Department for a little over three weeks after being sworn in on July 7, so you are involved but not that involved. A lot has gone on in the last three weeks, I am sure.

Again, we want to thank you for coming on very, very short notice, which was due to the fact that hopefully we will get out of here in the next few days for a few weeks. Again, thank you for being here to testify.

I now turn to our Ranking Member, Senator Klobuchar.

STATEMENT OF HON. KLOBUCHAR, U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF MINNESOTA

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for working with me to hold this hearing at the last moment. The reason it is short notice is because the Administration put out a half-baked plan with no notice and without consulting agricultural leaders.

As we start this discussion, let me be clear, I support efforts to make USDA work, but I do not think getting rid of 15,000 employees, which has already happened because of early buyouts, because of firing people, because of everything else that has happened, is good for agriculture. I do not think that these tariffs, which have dried up markets when our farmers and ranchers are already working on thin margins, have been good for agriculture.

We have a half-baked agenda that will almost certainly result here in worse services for farmers, families, and rural communities. Coordinated action and influence for rural America and agriculture does not mean just being close to where the producers are. That is true, we have that with ag. We have 90 percent of the employees already out in the field. What you guys are planning on doing or

proposing to us is to take that other 10 percent and break them down and send them to five different hubs, including a state that I would say is not in the top 10 for agriculture, not even close.

It also means having staff in a place, if we want to do our jobs right, where they can meet with their peers in other agencies and interact with key stakeholder groups and Members of Congress. Whittling down USDA's resources to do this crucial work puts rural America at a disadvantage when they do not have people in the room where it happens.

We have differences across the aisle, but I think every one of my colleagues understands that you need people that can meet with you. You need people that can go over to the White House so that you do not have people that do not have the interests of rural America in mind making all the decisions.

I am extremely concerned about the harm that this reorganization will have on the USDA's research. The previous relocation of the Economic Research Service and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture was nothing short of a disaster. A 2023 report by the Government Accountability Office, those reports are used by both Democrats and Republicans to make their points, underscores the threat that these short-sighted actions have on USDA stakeholders. GAO explicitly stated, based on this much smaller relocation, that ERS produced fewer key reports and that N-I-F-A, known as NIFA, took longer to process grants because of relocation. Why would we want that right now when we have already lost 15,000 employees, when farmers are already suffering, when we have these tariffs walloping them?

This means farmers did not get timely economic information, and researchers were left waiting for critical research funding. This reorganization plan would create similar chaos but on a much grander scale, which seems to be what this Administration is repeatedly about. Vacating long-standing research labs, including the very lab where USDA began work on sterilized flies to combat screwworms, and pushing researchers out of federal service will threaten the innovation that our farmers demand and need to combat animal and plant disease.

Just this year, 1,600 employees have already left USDA research agencies, and you want to make it even smaller when we are trying to compete with other countries, when we know that so many of our human-based diseases actually start with animals all around the world, when we know that farming and ranching has been the jewel of America's economy.

I hope that today's discussion will shed light on the effects this proposal will have on USDA's ability to respond to wildfires, administer critical nutrition programs, protect civil rights, and meet the needs of our farmers.

Before I close, I want to point out that this reorganization plan, as I noted at the beginning, was developed without input of Congress or the very stakeholders USDA aims to serve. It is unacceptable that we learned about this proposal just minutes before it was announced.

The first months of this Administration do not inspire confidence, given the months of freezes, cancellations, unfreezes, firings, hiring back, lease terminations, firings and subsequent attempts to rehire

veterinarians, farm loan officers, and other critical positions. It has injected uncertainty at a time when USDA's customers look for certainty and trust.

I did not vote for you, Mr. Deputy Secretary, but I did think that you would go in, based on your experience, and be able to do things that would actually help rural America. I actually took you at your word when you had pledged to work with us on things that would help. That is not what happened here when we had absolutely no notice of what you were going to do.

Chairman BOOZMAN. We will now introduce our witness, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Stephen Vaden. Deputy Secretary Vaden was confirmed earlier this year, and prior to his confirmation was a judge on the International Court of Trade. During the first Trump Administration, he served as General Counsel of the Department of Ag.

Deputy Secretary Vaden is a native of Union City, Tennessee, where his family has resided for many generations. Again, we thank you very much for being here this morning, and you are now recognized.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE STEPHEN ALEXANDER VADEN, DEPUTY SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE, USDA, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Mr. VADEN. Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, Committee Members, thank you for your invitation to come here today to talk about our reorganization plan. I have already submitted my testimony to you in writing. I do not believe reading it to you today would be a good use of our time.

Instead, I would like to focus on some facts and begin to answer some questions that have arisen. First, the Secretary's plan proposes relocating 2,600 employees from the National Capital Region to five hubs around the country. Let's put that number in perspective, shall we? From January 2021 to January 2025, the Biden Administration, 2,200 employees left Washington, DC. There was no congressional notice. There was no outcry. There was no Committee hearing. For more than 1,700 days, extending well beyond any fair definition of the COVID pandemic, USDA was on a maximum telework footing. Both career and political leadership rarely set foot in USDA's headquarters. Staff moved away from the National Capital Region. They expected not to be asked to return. There was no congressional notice. There was no outcry. There was no Committee hearing.

As was earlier noted, 90 percent of USDA's current staff reports to work outside the National Capital Region. We propose to add approximately 2.5 percent to that number, 2,600 people. With respect, it is insulting to suggest that the more than 90 percent of USDA employees who clock in every day outside of Washington, DC, are somehow less important and less vital than the people who do the same in Washington, DC. Everyone's work makes the Department. The heart of USDA is in the field, and the maximum number of people possible should report to work there.

Speaking of where USDA employees report to work, USDA has a total of 4,754 facilities at which its employees report to work every day. The Secretary's proposal calls for closing exactly four of

those 4,754 places of employment. How did we determine which ones to close? We followed congressional intent. Earlier this year, on January the 4th, President Biden signed into law the Use It Act. It passed this body, the Senate, 97 to 1. In case you are wondering, the one Senator who voted against it does not sit on the Agriculture Committee.

What does the Use It Act require? All buildings, leased or owned by a government agency, should be at least 60 percent occupied. Not a single one, not a one of USDA's buildings in the National Capital Region meet this congressionally mandated 60 percent occupancy rate.

What does the Use It Act say? If you fail to meet it, the agency should choose to consolidate and vacate to get into a footprint that does meet the 60 percent threshold. That is exactly what USDA is choosing to do, follow the law this body passed.

Finally, a note on timing. I understand the consternation some Members of this Committee have with the fact that they received notification at the same time that USDA's employees did. There was a thought behind that, and that thought was this. The employees are the ones who are most directly affected by the Secretary's decision. Out of common courtesy and respect, they should hear that decision from the Secretary first and not from a leak that originates from somewhere else.

USDA's entire focus of its reorganization efforts has been on voluntary decisions by employees. The Secretary has been frank with our employees about what our budgetary numbers require and what the Administration's expectations are so that those employees can make the best decisions for themselves and their families. That will continue to be the Department's guideposts.

We understand the need to work with Congress. The 30-day notification period required by law ensures that now is the time for us to receive feedback from stakeholders, from our employees, and from Members of Congress as well.

I look forward to taking your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Vaden can be found on page 38 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. First, I would like to enter into the record the memo that was provided, SM 1078-015, for the Committee record, without objection.

[The letter can be found on pages 39-43 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Can you tell us a little bit about—we have the 30-day period. What kind of timeline are we looking at after that as we go forward?

Mr. VADEN. Well, first, we have a 30-day period of consultation.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Right.

Mr. VADEN. That is required by statute, and we are going to honor every day of that. As schedules allow, both the Secretary of Agriculture and myself will travel to all five proposed hub locations. We will be engaging in further conversations with USDA's eight mission areas, as well as their agency leadership on connecting the right functions of each agency and mission area to a particular hub location.

We also need to finalize our conversations with the General Services Administration, which manages, of course, the entire real es-

tate footprint of the Federal Government regarding the leases and facilities that they have available in these five regions for USDA employees to move into.

Following those discussions, we will issue a finalized phased timeline for the implementation of the Secretary's plan. This will include union notifications where required by contractor law, employee notifications, including where needed, options provided by VERA and VSIP. We will then initiate the vacature of the National Capital Region space in a phased plan, as we have laid out in the buildings we have intended to vacate. Of course, throughout this process, we will consult not only with our employees and our stakeholders but Congress as well.

Chairman BOOZMAN. I think the thing that we are all concerned about, I know you all are, and certainly we as a Committee are, is the ability to serve customers in rural communities and the agriculture community that really is in a difficult situation. I am very proud of the work that we have done, as I mentioned in our opening statement. Can you tell us about how the plan is going to improve programs that support Americans who live in rural areas as we go forward?

Mr. VADEN. It is going to allow us to build the next generation of USDA leadership. Simply put, the hardest problem that any federal agency faces, and this is not limited to the Department of Agriculture, is talent retention. The cost of living here in Washington, DC, is prohibitive. Who do I have in mind when I am thinking about what I want for the next USDA leadership? Well, there is someone you all know here who is the story that we are trying to seek and continue, and that is my friend Ralph Linden, who is sitting back here behind me. He is currently our acting General Counsel. Ralph started his tenure with USDA in 1982, which also happens to be the year I was born, so I know he has worked at USDA for 43 years.

Ralph moved to a neighborhood in suburban Virginia. He bought a home with his wife and started a family. Ralph has worked his way up from the lowest of line attorneys in the Office of General Counsel to the top position at the Department, acting General Counsel. His institutional knowledge of legal issues that have come across USDA's desk is unparalleled. When he moved into that home in suburban Virginia, all of his neighbors were government employees. Today, all of the homes in Ralph's neighborhood sell for seven figures. There are no government employee neighbors of his. They are all dual professional, private sector doctors, lawyers, lobbyists, your typical D.C. types, no government employees to be found.

The future Ralph Lindens of the world cannot buy a home in Washington, DC, when the average price is seven figures. They cannot start a family. They cannot go on the journey that Ralph has had. They can do that in Raleigh, North Carolina. They can do that in Indianapolis, Indiana. They can do that in Kansas City, Missouri. They can do that in Fort Collins, Colorado. Yes, they can do that in Salt Lake City, Utah, which was why one of our principal considerations for where to put our regional hubs, was the cost of living. We want people to come to USDA for a career, to start a family, and to stay with us. Unfortunately, given the cost

of living in the National Capital Region, the Ralph Lindens of the world can no longer do that in the District of Columbia.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Very good. Senator Klobuchar.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you. It is apparent that USDA did not consult with or even bother to notify Congress with this plan. I would like to know, did you consult with the American Farm Bureau before releasing this plan, the organization that represents so many of our farmers and ranchers?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, the Secretary's memorandum was the first step, not the final step.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. You did not. Is that the answer?

Mr. VADEN. This is the beginning of the consultation process—

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Could you just answer yes or no? Did you—

Mr. VADEN [continuing]. not the end.

Senator KLOBUCHAR [continuing]. consult with the Farm Bureau before releasing this?

Mr. VADEN. The consultation process has just begun.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. You did not, for the record. Did you consult with the farmers union, the National Farmers Union, before releasing this plan? Yes or no?

Mr. VADEN. No, because the consultation process has just begun.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Did you consult with or submit this plan to the Office of Management and Budget before this?

Mr. VADEN. A plan was submitted to the Office of Management and Budget, and they are aware of our current plan.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Sixteen hundred employees have left USDA's research agencies. USDA fired many researchers, including those working on avian flu, only to later backtrack. USDA is extremely delayed in setting out funding for competitive research programs this year, as so many of my colleagues know. To me, these actions completely undermine agriculture research, just as we are seeing more and more animal diseases that are used against us in trade arrangements that hurt our producers. Senator Smith and I have seen the horrific effects of avian flu.

Secretary Vaden, USDA's reorganization plan would vacate USDA research labs and eliminate or consolidate offices for the Ag Research Service, the Agricultural Statistics Service. Do you believe that vacating research sites, eliminating offices, and losing researchers will improve outcomes for farmers who depend on this research?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, 91 of 94 ARS research labs are unaffected by the Secretary's memorandum. Further, the Secretary's memorandum states in its plain text that what will go on in Beltsville will take place over a period of years and in a way that does not interfere with any ongoing research. With regard to where researchers are, I think it is important to note, as you have referenced ERS and NIFA multiple times, that during the prior Administration, nearly all of the hiring that took place in those agencies was done virtually, which is to say, the employees that were hired reported to no office other than their own kitchen. Some of them who did have offices in the National Capital Region not only never reported to those offices, but moved hundreds of miles away.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Mr. Vaden, I know you will be surprised at this, but I am not interested in relitigating the pandemic right now, which spanned two Administrations, the Trump Administration, part one, and the Biden Administration. What I want to talk about is now. Do you think that these actions are actually going to make us more competitive when it comes to ag, more competitive when we are dealing with research issues across the world? How will you ensure that critical research projects will not suffer?

Mr. VADEN. Absolutely, I do. Because on a government salary, government employees cannot afford to start a quality life in Washington, DC, but they most certainly can in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. USDA's reorganization plan calls for closing every one of the existing Food and Nutrition Service offices, both the headquarters and regional offices, and relocating those employees as well. As you know, these programs, our food and nutrition assistance, which took a major hit in this recent budget bill—well, except for the states that have the highest error rates, it serves tens of millions of customers every year, including over 40 million SNAP recipients. The FNS has a huge task ahead implementing the bill with these SNAP cuts, huge transformation that we have decided to embark on.

How can USDA possibly ensure the integrity of the billions of dollars it is responsible for overseeing with this change and closing down all the offices? Can you provide the Committee with a breakdown of staff losses by function? Given our shared interest in the program integrity, I would like to know how many staff who have left positions related to financial management program integrity or management review of nutrition programs. Can you answer that?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, two points in response to that. Number one, I would be happy to get you those numbers, but your supposition that all Food and Nutrition Service employees will be leaving the National Capital Region is incorrect. Every agency and every mission area under the Secretary's plan will have representation and officials in Washington, DC. As I know you know well, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is primarily administered by the states. What USDA's role is, is to ensure the states are properly administering the program. It makes sense to move the employees whose job it is to oversee the states into these states that they are overseeing, rather than keeping them in Washington, DC.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Yes, I have just had a different experience in my own state office, in my own work. I think like when the work of our office is constituent services, you know, I have one person in each of the areas, but I have kept people together that have to interact to make decisions and do hard work together and figure out when the constituents call. We have a number of them with veterans concerns or a number of them with adoption concerns. Having that kind of interaction and having that kind of expertise in one space, which in the case of USDA, already 90 percent of their workforce, as we both agreed on, is dispersed.

One thing we have not discussed, given the raging forest fires we have seen recently, given the details included in the USDA's reorganization plan, and as you know, the President's budget proposed moving wildland fire operations out of the U.S. Forest Service to a new federal wildland firefighting agency housed in Interior.

There is also reporting that the Administration is considering moving parts of the USDA's Rural Development Agency to the Small Business Administration. Is the USDA still considering moving parts of the Forest Service and Rural Development to other Cabinet agencies?

When you are looking at only 10 percent of the workforce already in one place, and you want to halve that, and then you want to move away all the wildfire, are you trying to decimate this agency, Mr. Vaden? Are you trying to do what they are doing to the Department of Education? That is a question I want answered. What about the Forest Service? Are you still pursuing getting rid of that as well?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, the President's budget proposal is before this body. It speaks for itself. It calls for the centralization of all federal wildfire fighting capabilities. That is a proposal that predates this Administration, and I think it is one that should be taken seriously.

As it goes to the Forest Service, I want to make certain to state for the record that the Secretary's memorandum, again in its plain text, specifically notes that the Forest Service's fire safety lab will not be moving and is protected in this reorganization.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Last question. Why did you tell people to resign and fire them and then try to rehire them?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, we do not have the money in our budget to pay for all of the employees that were hired in the prior Administration. Former Secretary Vilsack, in comments to Agri-Pulse, admitted as much just last week.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. You are saying that you thought it was a good idea to fire them and then try to rehire them, the same people for the same positions, and you lost a whole bunch of them, veterinarians and researchers?

Mr. VADEN. Senator—

Senator KLOBUCHAR. You think that was a smart way to handle it?

Mr. VADEN [continuing]. were terminated as a result of the DRP.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. All right. I am done.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Hoeven?

Senator HOEVEN. Deputy Secretary, thanks for being here today. I support finding cost savings where you can. I support the idea of moving people out of the D.C. area and out into the field and closer to the farmer. Of course, the ultimate goal has to be better service to our farmers and ranchers across ag country.

I think the key here, though, that I want to talk about with you is that when the Trump Administration went through this process during the President's first term and moved NIFA and ERS to Kansas City, there was a process. We had a process where the Administration worked with Congress, and we went through the options. People could request being included, and there was a give and take. You know, that is kind of what we are looking for, I think, this time. I understand your point, okay, you wanted to bring something out. I think the key is that we know that there is an ability to work with you on this to effectuate the things we talked about, the cost savings, better service, those kind of things.

It also involves funding. I chair Ag Approps. It is going to change your funding needs and where those allocations have to go. We are hoping that—I mean, Republicans have cleared the Ag Approps bill to be on the Senate Floor now, and I am hoping with our colleagues across the aisle we are working on that right now, so it is very timely. This process is important.

As we look at the five sites, like from my part of the world, there is nothing within 600 miles of us, from Fargo, North Dakota, for example. We are in the heart of ag country. My question to you is, where are we in this process?

One other point I would make before you respond is that Secretary Rollins was in front of our Ag Approps Committee, and I specifically said, hey, will you work with us? Because we talked about this reorganization effort, and I said, we support the goals, but we want it to be a process where you work with Congress, with the Senate, both the Authorizing Committee and the Appropriations Committee on it, and we achieve those results together. I think that will help garner a lot more support for the effort.

I want to know where, and I will be up to see you later today, we can talk some more, but I want to know where we are in this process so we can accomplish just what I am laying out and what I think, you know, the Secretary and I had talked about previously.

Mr. VADEN. Well, Senator, as I stated in my opening remarks, this is the first step, not the final step. We are now accepting feedback, and we want to hear from you, and I know I will be speaking with you later this afternoon. I look forward to that meeting.

We could not put offices everywhere, and we learned some lessons from the ERS/NIFA relocation in term one. One of the most important lessons that we learned was instead of looking all over the map, literally, for where we should go if we are looking to relocate, the first thing we should do is see where we already are and where we already have office space available and a core set of employees. That is one of the reasons, for example, that Fort Collins, Colorado, jumped to the top of our list.

When we look at USDA's footprint in the State of Colorado, we not only have all of the employees in Fort Collins, but in nearby Lakeland and Denver. That just formed a natural core, particularly with Forest Service equities, that made sense for us to go ahead and build on. There is a similar story when you look at Kansas City and when you look at Raleigh, North Carolina, and the other hubs as well. That is what we were looking at.

While our plan does not have an office in North Dakota, one thing I will note is that nearly all of these hubs are closer to North Dakota than Washington, DC. While we could not put a location in every state, we are bringing these hubs closer to the American people that we serve, and if you look at a map, it is kind of neat how it worked out that they are pretty evenly spaced across the center of country from Raleigh all the way over to Salt Lake.

Senator HOEVEN. Again, the things we talked about, you know, cost reductions, moving people out of D.C. closer to the farm country, better service for farmers and ranchers, I mean, we can kind of go through and debate all the things you brought up as to each of the hubs. For example, what is magic about five hubs? How much agriculture is there in the State of Utah? We can go through

all those things, and whether in fact it is actually easier or better for our farmers and our ranchers in North Dakota, given the five hubs you have selected.

There is a difference between you selecting five hubs on your own and saying, okay, we are at the start of the plan, but this is the plan, and we are going to talk about it, but this is the plan. That is different than if we work together and come up with a plan that people have had input, they have been fairly heard and fairly treated, and it may be different than five hubs, and it may be different than these locations, and it may be different in form and function, but it is something that ultimately this Congress has something to say about, both from an authorizing standpoint, and certainly from an appropriation standpoint.

Is this a process where we are still going to work together on an outcome, or is this an outcome that we are now just going to talk about, but it is a fait accompli?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, if you read the memorandum, it has built-in flexibility. The memorandum lays out a vision, but then there is a line in that memorandum which says the vision and the plans laid out here can change, and the Secretary delegated authority to me to make changes where needed.

Senator HOEVEN. Then we look forward to working with you on it.

Mr. VADEN. Thank you, sir.

Senator HOEVEN. Yes, thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Bennet.

Senator BENNET. Thanks. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Thanks for having this hearing.

Mr. Vaden, thanks for being here. I will prove it to you later, but I have long called for the idea of trying to relocate people from Washington, DC, to parts of the country, partly to get out of the insulation of this place, partly to just be closer to, in this case, producers, but others as well. Philosophically, that is where I have been. I say I have to prove it to you because you just said Fort Collins had risen to the top of your list, and I wonder if you could describe a little bit what the intention is for that hub in Fort Collins. We are pleased to have that announcement for our state. Then I will ask you some follow-up questions. You mentioned fire. You mentioned the Forest Service equities as part of that too, so if you could just elaborate on that, I would appreciate it.

Mr. VADEN. Well, as you know, Senator, in your State of Colorado, the Forest Service already has many employees spread between Fort Collins, Lakeland, and Denver. We want to build on that. It makes sense for more of the Forest Service to be located actually close to the forests it is in charge of managing.

I know there has been some questions by certain Members of the Committee about Salt Lake City. That is also what brought Salt Lake City into the mix, what it can offer the Forest Service and, in particular, what it can offer the Forest Service's aviation assets as it looks in whatever Congress decides about the Administration's plan regarding centralizing wildfire efforts to fight the forest fires that, unfortunately, we know that the Forest Service will be charged with fighting.

Now, what other agencies may join the Forest Service in Fort Collins? Those lists have not been finalized. Partly that is because we need to consult with the employees, and we need to consult with the mission areas and agencies now that they know what we think makes the most sense to see how they want to adapt their footprint to these locations.

Senator BENNET. I think those consultations are important. I would also say it will be very important to consult with the local communities as well. The world-class research that is done at Colorado State University is an example of something that I think the Department can build on that I hope that if you and the Secretary are going to be out there, that you are able to make the time to meet with the people on the ground at the university and around that ecosystem to be able to try to apply as much imagination as possible to the work that you are trying to do.

Mr. VADEN. Well, Senator, we join with you in wanting to build in every force multiplier that we can. Either Brooke or I will visit Fort Collins, and we will give you a heads up before we go out there so if you wish to join us, you or your staff are more than welcome to, as well as your colleague in the Senate and the House.

That is one of the reasons why we think this plan is such a good idea, why you have laid out. When we get people into the field with the people whom they serve, you just mentioned Colorado State University, it is easier to collaborate, and it is easier to multiply efforts. It is that in-person collaboration that we are trying to spark.

Senator BENNET. I was actually on the phone with the Secretary this morning because we were having our biweekly fire update as it happens, and Secretary Burgum was on that call too. We had a, I think, seven Senators because this is a moment, obviously, of deep peril in the West as it is every summer. For us, this is life and death. The implementation of these bureaucratic choices is not philosophical at the end of the day. It is can we preserve the American West and can we preserve our way of life? Can we preserve our drainages and the water that we all rely upon? For us, none of this is trivial, none of this is about politics.

I would just finish by saying that the reorg that you guys are talking about with respect to fire generally, you know, that has to be something that there are deep consultations on. Today, we had a discussion with the Interior Secretary and with the Agriculture Secretary about the importance of thinking about how we are doing fire mitigation, how we are doing forest restoration, that this is not just about fighting fires, it is about the entire landscape.

I know John Hoeven knows this well from his work as Governor, and what you do before a fire happens and what you do on the back end of a fire. I hope we will use this as an opportunity to try to think as deeply as we can about this because we may never get another chance.

Mr. VADEN. Well, Senator, I am with you on that. Obviously, just as Brooke wants to work with you, I want to work with you on this because this is something we cannot afford to get wrong. I would just point out to you, I know you have probably read the memorandum, but in the memorandum it notes that one of the instructions from the Secretary is that, as we go forward with this reorga-

nization after consultation with Congress, we are going to do so in a way that does not interfere with the Forest Service during forest fire season. They are going to be left to do their job, and they will move when it is safe for them to do so.

As I noted in response to your questions, we took in particular account the Forest Service needs and in particular its aviation needs with regard to our selections of Salt Lake City, Utah, and Fort Collins, Colorado, as two of our five USDA hubs.

Senator BENNET. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator HOEVEN. Senator Hyde-Smith.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Thank you very much. I certainly appreciate you appearing today. You are doing a great job.

Also, I just want to be very clear that I support the efforts to make the Department of Agriculture more efficient and physically sustainable and responsive to farmers and producers, including making the USDA operate closer to the people it serves. I support taking a thorough look at USDA operations in Washington, DC, area and across the country to correct inefficiencies and to restore fiscal responsibility. I applaud you, Mr. Deputy Secretary, and the Secretary for reviewing departmental operations to ensure USDA is carrying out its missions in a responsible manner, and I think you are doing exactly that.

However, there are still many questions that need to be answered on the specifics of the reorganization proposal, so I am glad to understand that, you know, things are still open and nothing is final yet, but it is a work in process.

Page three of the Secretary's memo that was made public last week states that the Agricultural Research Service will eliminate its area offices, and residual functions will be performed by its Office of National Programs. I have concerns about the implication that this section may have for agricultural research, specifically with the work being done in Stoneville, Mississippi, that I think you are familiar with, which is home to the Agricultural Research Service Southeast area office. Stoneville is the largest agricultural research location in the Southeast and one of the largest for ARS. It is located in the Mississippi Delta where it remains close to thousands of farmers, producers, key stakeholders, and customers, which is a key pillar for the USDA reorganization proposal. This location provides careers, expertise, and economic opportunity in that area that struggles with poverty for generations.

The Southeast area office and the area administrative office staff provide leadership, opportunity, accountability, and administrative support services to all USDA research units across the Southeast region. This includes 27 research locations in Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, often in partnership with our land-grant universities. This involves 60 research units, 1,500 employees, including nearly 500 scientists, and a \$358 million annual budget.

The Southeast area office is critical to the success of the research programs covering everything from insect management research, warm water aquaculture research, which is very big in Mississippi, crop genetics, and water resource management. The area office staff understands the research being conducted in the region and

supports the area's scientists located at the various research units throughout the Southeast. This allows for dedicated resources to work on challenges unique to agriculture in the Southeast.

Stoneville, located in a low-cost area, already operates as a host center for federal employees. In addition, other federal agencies, including the NRCS, ARS, the DOI, have employees housed in that Whitten Center there. The center has the capacity to house other agency employees and research programs with quality office and lab space, which can be utilized as part of this reorganization proposal.

The area office operations budget of approximately \$9.9 million will no longer be managed at Stoneville if the area office is eliminated. This will have a negative effect on the local economy in Mississippi if employees are reassigned to other states. To me, this runs counter to the goal of moving USDA staff outside of Washington, DC, and getting them closer to the Department's customer base.

I could go on for days talking about how valuable the Southeast area office in Stoneville, Mississippi, is to USDA agriculture research and our ability to remain a global leader in agriculture.

Mr. Deputy Secretary, what assurances can you provide me that any proposal finalized by USDA will not negatively impact the Stoneville ARS facility, its employees, or the important work that is being done there?

Mr. VADEN. Well, Senator, I thank you for the question, and your passion for the center in Stoneville shines through in it. First of all, let me make a distinction that may not have been clear in my earlier remarks. The fact that the Secretary's memorandum indicates that we are removing a level of middle management between the people on the ground who actually do the work and the people who ultimately are responsible for overseeing it does not mean that automatically everyone who is located in a former regional office of an agency will be moved.

With respect to Stoneville, because of the important research that is actually conducted there, I believe at the current time, USDA's plan, subject of course to consultation with you, is for the staff to remain there.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Thank you very much for your answer.

Senator HOEVEN. Senator Smith.

Senator SMITH. Thank you, Senator Hoeven.

Mr. Vaden, I am going to follow up on the questions that my friend just asked regarding ARS facilities. We have two of them in Minnesota, as you no doubt know. One of them is in St. Paul, conducts research on Cereal disease, plant science, and soil and water management. Of course, you probably also know that earlier this year, those lab researchers in St. Paul were laid off and then rehired. There is also a lab in Morris, Minnesota, that focused on soil and water conservation. That lab has 15 full-time vacancies right now due to the current Trump Administration's force reductions and lack of hiring.

My first question is, what is the Administration's plans for these two ARS facilities in Minnesota? What is your plan for keeping them going, staffing, and letting them do their work?

Mr. VADEN. Well, I appreciate the question, Senator. With regard to the staffing levels at those individual facilities in Minnesota, I will have to get back with you on that. With regard to the labs themselves, as I noted in the beginning, as a result of the Secretary's plan and the President's budget, which is currently pending before the Congress, 90 of 94 ARS labs will be untouched. The labs that you have mentioned in the State of Minnesota are among the 90 of 94 ARS labs that will remain untouched by this reorganization.

Senator SMITH. Thank you. When I spoke with you during your confirmation hearing, you and I had a conversation about the importance of tribal relations and the trust and treaty responsibilities that the Federal Government has to tribal nations. As we both know, also the USDA does not have the best track record when it comes to working with tribes.

Let me ask you, could you describe what tribal consultation you have undertaken so far with this reorganization? What are your plans for that tribal consultation?

Mr. VADEN. Well, we intend, during the consultation period that has begun, to hear from all of our stakeholders, including tribes. I hope you took note of the fact that in the Secretary's memorandum, although it has not received as much attention as certain other parts of the memorandum, we note that we are going to consolidate tribal relations functions—

Senator SMITH. Yes, I noted that.

Mr. VADEN [continuing]. within mission areas and ensure that our Office of Tribal Relations delivers all statutorily required functions. The reason that we want to do this is similar to the reason that we are wanting to consolidate civil rights functions at USDA.

Historically, as you well know, there have been inequities between agencies in terms of how these communities are dealt with and the equality of service they get from USDA. We believe that by consolidating these functions, we can truly ensure that all tribal members receive the same level of service that they deserve, regardless of which agency within USDA they are dealing with.

Senator SMITH. I will look forward to following up with you on that. If you will allow me, tribal nations are not another constituency of the USDA. We have a government-to-government relationship with tribal nations. In that sense, it is different, though I mean in no sense any disrespect to the important constituencies that the USDA has.

Mr. Vaden, there is a huge interest in Minnesota in the work that the USDA does around rural development. This has been an area that I have spent a lot of time working on. I want to, in the short time I have left—I am a little concerned about what is in this reorganization plan or what is not in this reorganization plan regarding what the Administration's plans are for rural development. Can you tell me, does the Administration commit to maintaining rural development as a USDA mission area, rather than having it get farmed out to other agencies across the Federal Government? What is your plan for keeping rural development state offices?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, rural development is very personal to me. As you and I know, when I came before you for my confirmation hearing, I live in rural America. That is where I go home to. I have

seen, as you have seen in the State of Minnesota over the past many decades, where towns that used to have multiple factories, including my own, have lost those in recent years. You have a committed champion in rural development at USDA in Secretary Rolins and myself.

When it comes to our state-level offices for rural development, the county offices I believe you referred to, there is a reason why they are not mentioned in the memorandum. That is because they are unaffected by this memorandum.

Senator SMITH. You expect those regional offices, those local offices, to stay as they are right now?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, we are going to leave the county-level footprint alone as a result of this memorandum. That not only goes for rural development, I want to be clear, it also goes for the Farm Services Agency.

Senator SMITH. Just yesterday, the Banking Committee, where I serve, passed unanimously out of Committee a significant piece of housing legislation. Included in that legislation is a bill that Senator Rounds and I from South Dakota have worked on to make important improvements and reforms to the Rural Housing Service so that we can preserve rural housing in communities. This is over 400,000 units of rural housing across the country.

I constantly hear about the challenges of staffing shortages and technology challenges in rural housing service, which makes it very difficult for the agency to actually function and operate effectively, and our bill addresses this. I want to just mention this to you because, as the Secretary and the agency moves forward, we have made an important first step with passing this legislation out of Banking Housing. Now, I hope that we can move it through the Senate Floor and through the House and get the President's signature. As I said, it is a unanimous passage out of Banking Housing Committee. I hope that we can continue to work on that.

Thank you. I am sorry I went over time, Mr. Chair.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Tuberville.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Vaden, thanks for being here, and thanks for what you are trying to do, increasing government efficiency, reducing unnecessary spending. We are \$37 trillion in debt, and we need to look after our hardworking farmers and producers, our foresters. We have already lost 150,000 farms in the last few years, 25,000 farmers. The suicide rate is out the roof. We are losing. In the last profession I was in, you lose and you get your ass fired real quick, and we are losing.

Our farmers are—I mean, they are in trouble. Even if they make a profit this year, we are still going to lose thousands of farms. We are going to find out, really, how quick we are going to need farmers and producers when all this happens.

Our buildings are falling apart. We are in debt. We need expensive repairs. Do we have any estimates how much money this is going to cost the Federal Government and American taxpayers, you know, through the USDA of moving people around? I know that we do have some good structures, but have we looked into any of that at all?

Mr. VADEN. We do have an estimate, Senator, regarding how much at a minimum we expect to save once costs are taken into account, and that is approximately \$4 billion. How did we get to that number? We got to that number by looking into account the headcount reductions as a result of the Deferred Resignation Program. Those alone will save the Department of Agriculture approximately \$1.9 billion net.

You have mentioned the state of our buildings, and you are unfortunately correct, particularly when it comes to the National Capital Region, and you are looking at the four buildings that the Secretary's memorandum proposes to vacate. The value of the deferred maintenance on those buildings, the liability on USDA, is \$2.2 billion, with a B, dollars, hard to conceive, but that is the calculation when you add those four buildings together of how much maintenance they need to bring them up to modern standards.

When you add those two sums together of expected savings, you are starting out with more than \$4 billion. That is before we take into account the lower cost of living for employees, the lower lease rates that we will have to pay in the five hubs. Of course, the full value of that we will only know when the plan is finalized after consultation with Congress. We start out at a baseline of \$4 billion worth of savings.

Senator TUBERVILLE. You obviously did your due diligence on housing in some of these new locations. You feel good about that, about the amount that it will cut the cost of living for a lot of these young people, hopefully, that we get in the USDA?

Mr. VADEN. We do, Senator. As a matter of fact, if you take a look at the Federal Reserve Board's data, which of course, as you know, they analyze large regions of the country typically, not necessarily individual states. Washington, DC, falls into the Northeast region for the Federal Reserve Bank. According to the Federal Reserve, the average price of a home, the median price of a home in the Northeast region is more than \$800,000. What, according to the Federal Reserve, is the median price of a home in the Midwest where we are sending many of our employees? It is less than half that.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Yes, thank you. Talking about the nutrition and sending more people back into the states to help with that, my future plan, obviously, is trying to get back into the State Government and helping that area.

Our error rates, in a lot of our states, are awful, absolutely awful, and we want to get ours down in the State of Alabama, too. Do you think this will help be able to get error rates down to a point where we can survive, you know, and make sure we feed the right people and help the right people that need it, other than the people that are sitting on the couch and watching TV?

Mr. VADEN. I do, Senator. As I noted in response to an earlier question, of course the Food and Nutrition Service, they will have employees in Washington, DC, in either the Whitten or Yates building going forward under the Secretary's plan. As we shift more people into the field who are focused on the states and focused on the regions of the country that we serve, that means more people for individuals in Alabama and every other state to reach out to, to help with technical assistance and whatever other advice

and counsel that we can offer, best practices, what have you, to get those error rates down so that states can come into compliance with the new bill that Congress has passed.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Welch.

Senator WELCH. Thank you very much. Thank you.

First of all, I actually do support as much local engagement, local leadership as possible. I have introduced legislation on FEMA to push much more of the decision-making, much more of the authority, back to the local communities that are invested in making things work. All right? I believe more local leadership, less Washington-centered leadership, is important.

Let me begin. I have some inclination to be supportive of folks being back home, closer to where they are serving. The concern I have is whether the reorganization plan is on the level, whether it is about empowering local communities, or it is about decimating the already severely cut-back workforce. That is the tone of what my questions will be about.

In Vermont, we have lost 78 staff members already. Our local USDA is terrific. They are responsive. We call them. They give us an answer. They help us, right? That is what happens to you guys. We lost 78 people. How am I going to get excited about this so-called reorganization plan where folks are going back, but we have already lost 78? Tell me why I should be confident about this.

Mr. VADEN. Well, Senator, to use your phrase, this plan is on the level. The Secretary and I are both serious. Employees who accept their new locations, they have got a job, and we have got an office for them. We are planning a new home for them in a location where their federal salary will go farther.

Senator WELCH. Here is what does not make sense to me. If you believe in the local control, why do you fire local people?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, if you are referring to the deferred resignation plan, those were voluntary decisions made by individual employees who chose, with the information that the agency provided to them, to seek a new career—

Senator WELCH. I am going to interrupt you here because we are going to have a little bit of a disagreement on that. You know, in talking to a lot of federal workers, they felt the axe was coming down, and they had to make a choice between two really terrible things, get fired, get one of those notices that people get, and they then are escorted out of the building within five minutes—my daughter-in-law got that over at USAID—or take the buyout. That does not satisfy me. Again, we have got 78 people who wanted to stay on their jobs, by and large, and were doing a good job and could answer the phone when I called, and they are gone. Try to reassure me concretely about how this works out for the benefit of local folks and farmers who depend on USDA.

Mr. VADEN. Well, Senator, with regard to your concerns about terminations, I would point you to the language of the memorandum. The memorandum puts a thumb on the scale against future RIFs. As a matter of fact, the memorandum's terms specifically note that there can be no RIFs under this reorganization unless it is personally approved by me. With regard to—

Senator WELCH. I do not want to cut you off, but—

Mr. VADEN. Sure.

Senator WELCH [continuing]. you know what my concern is—

Mr. VADEN. I do.

Senator WELCH [continuing]. and I would like to be able to follow up because I want this, in the real world, to be beneficial for folks in Vermont, for our farmers who are incredibly valuable citizens.

The other question I have is about the balance between the commodity farming interests and concerns that many of our Members on this Committee have because that is the farming in their region, and like the vegetable farmers or the dairy farmers. I have been working for years in trying to get more support for those local farming enterprises that are suitable for the state that I live in.

My concern is an imbalance here, and I am not going to be arguing about taking anything from our commodity folks, but I want more for folks with vegetable farms, farm-to-school, organic farms, and I do not see that priority as being important in what I have seen from the Department of Agriculture so far. Can you address that?

Mr. VADEN. Sure. Let me make two points in regard to that. First, this reorganization plan as proposed by the Secretary is not meant to preferentially advantage or disadvantage any particular sector of agriculture. Second, I know Senator Schiff, who just came in, shares your concerns about whether USDA cares as much about specialty crop farmers, I know you mentioned dairy farmers, as they do others.

Speaking for myself, I do. We want all farmers, traditional, organic, specialty crop, commodity crop, to make a profit and to do well. If there are things that we can do better, if there are ideas that you have about how we can serve your constituents better, or if there are programmatic ideas we can provide technical assistance on, please call me.

Senator WELCH. Well, I will call you, and what it really does come down to is resource allocation because that is the reflection of the decision of Congress as to where the priority is. It is really essential to a lot of farmers that their non-commodity orientation be respected and be supported and be encouraged. Thank you very much.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Marshall.

Senator MARSHALL. Thank you, Chairman.

Mr. Vaden, welcome. Glad you are here today. In your testimony, you were mentioning some of the advantages of moving to some of these communities, and I would just point out that you failed to mention that moving to Kansas City, that suddenly you would have the advantage of being a Chiefs fan. Rather than suffering through another year here with the Washington Commanders, you failed to mention to be within an hour of the most storied basketball program in the Nation and just barely two hours away from the first land-grant university in America.

I just would want to give you a chance to talk a little bit more. You think about the Kansas City metro, within two-hour drive of the Iowa State University, the Nebraska University, Missouri, Arkansas—how far away is Auburn? Not too far, 35 miles.

Anyway, so my point is, you cannot coach talent. You have to have talent. Within just miles of there is some of the greatest ag

research in the world. How important is that to American agriculture to have, let alone the affordability issues you mentioned?

Mr. VADEN. It is vital. I want to add to the mix NBAF. We have not forgotten about that. You have not either. I know there is some unfinished business left there. When you think about the potential that facility has and the technology and level of research that can go on there that are vital for the future of American agriculture, you have pointed to many of the reasons why Kansas City also joined as one of our five hubs. The Department put some thought into this. We want to spark that level of collaboration that you have noted, whether it be with our land-grant and non-land-grant university partners, whether it be with individual farmers, whether it be with the local chamber of commerce in an area that is driven and motivated, even though it may be in an urban setting, by agriculture.

I know that you are well aware that the Federal Reserve has a location in Kansas City, and that when we are looking at the shape of the agricultural economy for inclusion in the Beige Book, we look to what the Kansas City Fed has to say.

Senator MARSHALL. Yes.

Mr. VADEN. USDA will be able to take advantage of all of these synergies in not only Kansas City, but the other hubs that we have laid out.

Senator MARSHALL. Over the past four years, it was reported that only six percent of USDA employees were in the office as well, and more and more, just the crescendo of complaints from my ag producers back home, that they could work with their local FSA officer or their conservation officer, but then that report would get somehow clogged here in D.C. I want to compliment the White House, the \$10 billion that was appropriated in spring within days. Within days, my farmers had the help that they needed, and then more recently, I think it was \$16 billion.

Something is working right from a standpoint of customer service. I just cannot help but think when you have people working for USDA, out there going to church, going to the soccer match, all those type of things, with the local farmers and ranchers, it is going to be a better service as well.

Just talk about customer service, how that is going to be impacted by these people, you know, net-net, moving out into the hinterlands, as we call it.

Mr. VADEN. Well, I do not consider it the hinterlands. I consider it home, Senator, but with regard to having more people in the field, we agree with you that we think the level of service will improve. Not only do we agree with you, even if we had a disagreement, the Congress has legislated on this point. This is another matter that drove our consideration of this plan, and that is looking at USDA's reorganization authority, which was granted to us by the Congress in 1953.

If you actually look at the statute, I am a former judge, so I tend to look at statutes. What does the statute say? The statute says, in carrying out this law, "The Secretary shall seek to simplify and make efficient the operation of the Department of Agriculture to place the administration of farm programs close to the State and local levels," from the statute. This is exactly what Congress in-

tended, the maximum amount of USDA resources dedicated out in the field, not in Washington, DC.

Senator MARSHALL. Yes. I just want to make one last point. President Trump's tariffs are working. He has made incredible trade deals that are going to open up markets that we never had access to before. We have never sold a cheeseburger in all of Europe. Ethanol, 40 percent of our corn crop goes to ethanol. Suddenly, EU, U.K., all these countries are going to be buying ethanol as well. We are seeing manufacturing jobs move back to this country because of these tariffs as well. American agriculture will benefit significantly for long-term trade agreements, for long-term success as well, and we cannot wait to see what is next coming out of the White House and the tariffs.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Mr. Chairman, before our next Senator asks questions, I just wanted to put on the record two letters. I will put a pin in my disagreements with Senator Marshall on the tariffs.

First of all, the National Association of Forest Service Retirees sent you and I a letter opposing the reorganization of the Forest Service, saying it would decimate the ability of the Forest Service to deliver services and conduct research.

Second letter, American Federation of Government Employees, which represents many of these USDA employees, they sent a letter to you and me opposing the reorganization due to the impact on the workforce and asking for an impact assessment and cost-benefit analysis.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Without objection.

[The letters can be found on pages 44–53 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Let's see. Senator Luján.

Senator LUJÁN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

You know, farmers and ranchers back in New Mexico have told me that these tariffs feel like a gut punch. Everything's getting more expensive for them. Implements are getting more expensive. Fertilizer is getting more expensive. I mean, heck, I do not know how many of you buy ground beef. I do. If you go buy it now, compared to the prices that you saw just a little bit of time ago, I mean—anyhow, that is not what I am here to talk about today. I thought it was important to mention that, though.

Mr. Vaden, Secretary Rollins' memo proposes effectively eliminating the U.S. Forest Service's nine regional offices over the next year. As you know, the Forest Service's Southwest regional office is located in New Mexico. Now, what I am hoping is that we get some information shared with the employees in all parts of America where they are going to be impacted by this plan, including the 250 employees at the office. I want them to be prepared. Mr. Vaden, what will eliminating the regional office in Albuquerque mean for the employees there?

Mr. VADEN. Well, Senator, let me first of all point out that with regard to the Forest Service employees in Albuquerque, Albuquerque is specifically mentioned in the Secretary's memorandum because of its important H.R. functions. That is a core area of the Forest Service that will be unaffected by this reorganization.

Senator LUJÁN. Mr. Vaden, it is going to stay open?

Mr. VADEN. No, Senator. If you will allow me——

Senator LUJÁN. Okay. Well, then let's get on to the employees, please.

Mr. VADEN. No, Senator. The——

Senator LUJÁN. Let's fast-forward.

Mr. VADEN. The H.R. function will be there.

Senator LUJÁN. Okay.

Mr. VADEN. The regional office will no longer be there.

Senator LUJÁN. Okay. What does that mean to the employees?

Mr. VADEN. Those employees may be absorbed into other areas in Albuquerque or may be asked to move, pending consultation with the employees and the agencies.

I also think it is important to note, because I want to respond to the question that you sent to the Department of Agriculture just the other day, that you asked about the lease at the building at 333 Broadway Street SE. I thought you would want to know that that building has long been on the GSA priority list for closure. Its lease was set to end on the 31st of December 2026.

Senator LUJÁN. I appreciate that, Mr. Vaden, if I——

Mr. VADEN. This reorganization plan——

Senator LUJÁN. I have limited time, sir. Mr. Vaden—Mr. Chairman, can I get some help here? Mr. Vaden, I have limited time here. We sent you those questions so you could respond in writing. You chose not to do that so maybe now you will. I hope that you just respond to these questions in writing. That is why we sent them to you ahead of time.

Mr. VADEN. That question was not a part of the letter that Senator Klobuchar sent.

Senator LUJÁN. You just said I sent you a letter.

Mr. VADEN. No, you sent——

Senator LUJÁN. I just sent you some questions.

Mr. VADEN [continuing]. an inquiry.

Senator LUJÁN. Anyhow, I am not going to get into——

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Mr. Chairman, if you could give——

Senator LUJÁN.—this back-and-forth——

Senator KLOBUCHAR [continuing]. Senator Luján extra time. One letter is not all we need here when we had no consultation. Senator Luján has every right to send his own letter.

Senator LUJÁN. Mr. Vaden, what does it mean to the employees? Have they been consulted?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, the employee consultation begins now. As I mentioned in my——

Senator LUJÁN. When is now? Today?

Mr. VADEN. It began the day that the memorandum was issued.

Senator LUJÁN. Have the employees in Albuquerque been consulted?

Mr. VADEN. They will be consulted through their union members, through their——

Senator LUJÁN. It started——

Mr. VADEN [continuing]. union representatives——

Senator LUJÁN.—but they have not been consulted yet.

I would like to ask, Mr. Chairman, if we need to send a formal letter when the consultation in New Mexico will truly begin with the employees.

Now, based on the Secretary's memorandum, it is not clear if the center is going to be closed or relocated. That is why we are asking this particular question. The Administration needs to provide more details about this reorganization plan and how proposed changes will impact wildfire response. A lot of these questions may not even have to be asked today if our staff's questions would have been answered as opposed to ignored.

When will you, on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, provide this information to this Committee?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, we have already had multiple staff meetings. We would intend to continue those over the next 30-day consultation period—

Senator LUJÁN. Mr. Vaden, I will try to be more clear here.

Mr. VADEN [continuing]. and we are happy to—

Senator LUJÁN. I am sorry if my English is spoken with an accent. I apologize. I am proud to be born and raised in New Mexico. I will try to speak more clearly. When will you provide this information to this Committee?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, we will get it to you. You send us your questions. You will get—

Senator LUJÁN. I am asking you right now. When will you provide this information on the reorganization plan to this Committee, to the Members, to those of us that are duly elected to be here? When?

Mr. VADEN. As we finalize it, you will—

Senator LUJÁN. Is it not finalized?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, as I noted in my opening remarks, this is a vision to be implemented. The individual details will need to be worked out with the agencies and the employees.

Senator LUJÁN. Let me ask the question a different way.

Mr. VADEN. Obviously that involves consultation with you.

Senator LUJÁN. Mr. Vaden, when will you provide the existing information about the reorganization plan to this Committee and to the Members?

Mr. VADEN. The existing information is contained in the memorandum. If you want background data regarding how some of these decisions were made, we are happy to work with you on it.

Senator LUJÁN. I appreciate that. I appreciate it. We are on the same page there.

Now, Mr. Vaden, one thing I have been hearing from folks back home around SNAP and WIC is that we are seeing an all-out assault on these food programs. One in four Americans rely on programs to eat, as we all know. The Administration is attempting to gut the specialized workforce that ensures these programs are operating effectively and efficiently.

Now, I read the Secretary's memorandum that was released on the 24th. Now, the questions I am getting from people back in New Mexico is that they are already struggling to get timely technical assistance needed to effectively administer WIC to the mothers and kids back home. Has the Department conducted an analysis of how this proposed reorganization will impact the ability of Americans to access federal nutrition assistance programs?

Mr. VADEN. By sending more people into the states and having fewer people in Washington, DC, we will have more employees, in-

cluding in the Food and Nutrition Service, closer and more available to our state partners to provide the assistance they need.

Senator LUJÁN. Again, Mr. Vaden, if I could just be clear, did you all conduct the analysis of how it is going to impact the ability to feed folks?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, as part of our plan, our entire effort was to increase——

Senator LUJÁN. Mr. Vaden, I appreciate that, sir. Did you conduct analysis? Has analysis been conducted, yes or no?

Mr. VADEN. Yes. We show that——

Senator LUJÁN. Okay, my question is when will——

Mr. VADEN [continuing]. by bringing more employees in the field we will get better results.

Senator LUJÁN. I appreciate that. You can submit that all in writing as well. When will you commit to sharing the analysis with this Committee?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, we will work with you following the hearing.

Senator LUJÁN. A week? A month? If it already exists, it could be here tonight.

Mr. VADEN. Senator, with regard to the analysis in each specific agency——

Senator LUJÁN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Fischer.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Mr. Secretary, for your attendance here today. I appreciate that you answered our Chairman's call to come before this Committee and be here in a fairly short manner.

You may recall during your confirmation process, you and I discussed the potential benefits of relocation of USDA, and I shared that I thought Nebraska would be a great location for parts of the agency with a cheaper cost of living, a workforce where agriculture is ingrained in our culture, and high-quality educational institutions. Ultimately, I would have liked to see a process that allowed for Nebraska to demonstrate its strong value proposition.

While I do agree with the overreaching goal here, I have to express disappointment in how this has been rolled out and the lack of engagement with Congress prior to the announcement.

I also agree with Senator Hoeven that to accomplish a major reorganization, Congress will need to be a partner to provide resources and perhaps additional authorities. I hope you will commit that, moving forward, USDA will be proactive in engagement with this Committee and also with the Appropriations Committee.

Mr. VADEN. Well, Senator, as I noted in my opening remarks, the Secretary's memorandum was the first step, not the final step. It was essentially the green flag, not the checkered flag. Now what we are entered into is a 30-day statutorily required period, having given notice to you of our intentions to reorganize the Department to hear from you.

As Senator Hoeven noted, he is coming to meet with me later today. I thank him actually, since I am spending some time up here today with him, for him coming down to see me in my office in the Whitten building. I will be happy to meet with other Members of this Committee who have similar concerns, ideas, effi-

ciencies that they want to share with us so we can make our plan better.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you. I would like to start now with a few questions to understand some of the impacts to some of the USDA assets that we have in my State of Nebraska. We are home to several USDA research facilities, and that includes the U.S. Meat and Animal Research Center that conducts research that is strongly supported by our livestock industry, and a new ARS facility co-located at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln that is focused on innovative precision agriculture research for which construction has started. With the reorganization effort, can you verify that neither of these ARS facilities will be impacted?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, I can, and I am surprised you left out the NRCS Soil—

Senator FISCHER. I was going to get to that.

Mr. VADEN [continuing]. Survey Center in Lincoln. All of those facilities are unimpacted. As you probably remember from my opening remarks, 90 of 94 ARS research facilities are unimpacted by this memorandum. That includes all of the facilities in Lincoln, and for that matter, the rest of Nebraska. You may have noticed in the Secretary's memorandum that while the individual facilities were not called out by name, Lincoln, Nebraska, was, and I am here to confirm that that was the intent of putting that in there to signal that those facilities, for the reasons you have noted, are important and are part of the 90 of 94 ARS facilities which will be untouched.

Senator FISCHER. More broadly, as you go through this reorganization effort, what thought have you given to address any outstanding facility improvements that may be needed at these research centers? Basically, I am asking you, what commitment do you have to these centers in the future?

Mr. VADEN. Well, the budget is a number that Congress gives us. Obviously, for every dollar that we save, that gives us the opportunity, if Congress allows, us to reallocate those funds toward facilities we intend to keep. I am excited about the fact that the Secretary's plan calls for us to save at least \$2.2 billion by ditching these National Capital Region facilities that are out of date and in disrepair. We are happy to work with the Congress if, as a result of those savings, there are other facilities that you think are worthy of investment with those moneys.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you. I am sure we will be in touch in conjunction with the university. Thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Warnock has something to do, so I think, Senator Schiff, you are going to allow him to precede you. Senator Warnock.

Senator WARNOCK. Thank you, Chair Boozman. Thank you, Senator Schiff.

Mr. Vaden, last week, without notice to the Members of this Committee, Secretary Rollins announced this mass reorganization. Now you are here in response to the Chairman's call. What I would like to know is whether this plan will disrupt the lives of everyday Georgians who depend on USDA's programs. These are folks I talk to, obviously, all the time and what USDA does or does not do, how it is able to deliver matters to farmers and families in Georgia.

I am proud to have secured \$21 billion for farmers and rural communities in Georgia devastated by Hurricane Helene and other disasters. I am glad to see applications for some of this funding are finally opening up. We are already at the beginning of what could be a very rough hurricane season. I have seen firsthand the devastation that these hurricanes can bring. Are the USDA staff who administered disaster funding affected by this reorg?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, our intent in the Secretary's memorandum is that for these frontline-facing positions, whether it be the people who do our normal commodity programs or who are involved in the disaster relief programs, that their efforts not be affected by this reorganization.

Senator WARNOCK. Well, do you expect that part of USDA to see some downsizing of staff?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, we have made a commitment that if employees go with us to these new locations, they have got a job, and we are planning to have an office for them there. That is what we are planning for. Now, whether every employee will voluntarily decide to come with us, I do not know.

Senator WARNOCK. A relocation for a family is a big deal.

Mr. VADEN. It is.

Senator WARNOCK. What do you think will happen?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, I think actually a large number of them will choose to come. I think many of them will choose to come because, given cuts made by other federal agencies here in Washington, DC, the job market is not what it once was here. I think that the exciting opportunity these new hubs provide for them to actually be able to own a home affordably and grow and expand their family with the lower cost of living, that is one of the primary reasons we chose each of these five hubs, will attract them to come.

Senator WARNOCK. You do not expect a significant reduction in staff as a result of the reorganization?

Mr. VADEN. It is hard for me to predict how many will. Do I think 100 percent will say yes and relocate? No, Senator, that would not be realistic for me to say that. I think a significant percent, more than a majority, will choose to come.

Senator WARNOCK. What are your plans? What are your plans to ensure that this reorganization does not continue to delay the roll-out of these critical funds that farmers need in the wake of these disasters?

Mr. VADEN. Well, Senator, FSA is hard at work on that. I have had meetings, even though I am only three weeks on the job, about the next phases of that rollout. You may have seen I participated with Secretary Rollins in the release of some of those funds my very first week on the job. You have my word that that is first and foremost in our mind. We are aware that the farm economy is not strong right now. Producers need these funds as quickly as possible, and we are going to get them out.

Senator WARNOCK. Will you review the impact of the reorganization plan and then report back to this Committee without us having to call you? Will you report back to the Committee regarding whether or not it is working?

Mr. VADEN. Absolutely. By the way, I do not know whether you were in here when I mentioned it for some of the other Senators.

If so, I apologize for repeating myself. If you have ideas about how we can reorganize better or if there are particular things in Georgia that you want to draw our attention to, we are happy to meet with you.

I hope you saw in the memorandum that Athens, Georgia, though it is not a hub that we have selected, will play an important role in USDA going forward. The Forest Service, as you know, already has some significant assets in Athens, Georgia, and we actually intend to build on those as a part of our reorganization and are working with the southern region of the Forest Service and the current Regional Forester there in transitioning USDA's assets for the Forest Service, which are so important for the eastern region of the country, to the Athens location.

Senator WARNOCK. In the first Trump Administration, USDA relocated the National Institute of Food and Agriculture to Kansas City, Missouri. According to a report from the Government Accountability Office, this move resulted in the Black staff at this agency declining by 65 percent. Mr. Vaden, what is your plan to ensure that this reorganization does not disproportionately impact staff of a particular demographic?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, we are going to treat everyone equally, make certain everyone has the information, and as you are probably aware, you and Congress have generously granted to the agencies the ability to provide relocation assistance when things like this do happen, and of course employees who decide to make that move are eligible for this relocation assistance.

Senator WARNOCK. What is your plan to make sure—because we saw the disproportionate impact in Kansas in that case. What is your plan to ensure that we do not see this kind of disproportionate impact?

Mr. VADEN. Well, Senator, we want every employee to join with us, regardless of race, gender, or any other characteristic.

Senator WARNOCK. Yes, but I am asking—

Mr. VADEN. If you have ideas on how we can target specific populations to ensure that they see the benefits of the Secretary's plan, I would like to—

Senator WARNOCK. Well, to be quite honest with you, I am deeply suspicious of that because the approach of this Administration seems to be to push against any kind of intentional effort to make sure that we do not see disproportionate impact on a whole range of issues.

Let me ask you this thing. Yes or no, has the USDA conducted any sort of disparate impact analysis of this reorganization plan to determine if there is any disproportionate harm to any particular groups of staff or farmers?

Mr. VADEN. Not to my knowledge because the plan has not been finalized.

Senator WARNOCK. Will you commit to doing so and sharing the results with this Committee?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, we will take into account our civil rights responsibilities in everything we do.

Senator WARNOCK. My question is, would you conduct a disparate impact analysis?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, you have my word that everything we do will not be based on race.

Senator WARNOCK. I take that as a no. Thank you very much.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Moran.

Senator MORAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, thank you for your presence today. I appreciate the chance to be here to hear what you have to say. I am pleased that in three weeks on the job, you seem so knowledgeable about the details of the Department of Agriculture. I express my appreciation for the idea that work by federal employees and work for federal taxpayers and constituents, particularly farmers and ranchers, can be accomplished outside the D.C. area.

I have been through this issue with you previously in the earlier Administration and was pleased by the decision to have two research agencies relocated in Kansas City. I will leave off the word Missouri in that explanation, but two agencies located in Kansas City. I want to know, do you anticipate in moving any functions of TFAA or FAS outside the District of Columbia?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, I do not want to give a definitive yes or no answer, but as you know, our trade and foreign agricultural affairs mission area, which Congress instructed us to create in the 2018 Farm Bill, is something of a special animal, as most of its focus is actually international rather than domestic. It is basically a diplomatic corps for America's farmers, ranchers, and foresters.

Given the specific focus of that agency, while I cannot guarantee that there will not be some employee who gets relocated, I think that that agency, when we are looking at what it is we are trying to do and that agency's focus is international rather than domestic largely, that it might be among the lesser affected mission areas.

Senator MORAN. Well, Kansas City Commodity Office has historically played a significant role in the function of international food aid programs, particularly Food for Peace. Do you see those functions continuing under this reorganization?

Mr. VADEN. All functions that remain with the Department of Agriculture by statute are unaffected. We cannot, with a reorganization, add to or reduce from the statutory responsibilities Congress has given to the agency.

Senator MORAN. Do you have any insight into what subagencies, if any, could move to Kansas City besides ERS and NIFA? Kansas City is also the home to the RMA Compliance Office and the Domestic Inspection Operations Office for the Federal Grain Inspection Service. Thoughts about those?

Mr. VADEN. We do not have finalized lists. I think it is important to know that with regard to RMA, that that is an agency where, because of its function, many of the people are already out in the field, and some of them are remote. They are remote for a reason, not because it became cool five years ago, but because their job requires them to be on the road, and this reorganization plan does not affect that.

Senator MORAN. I also would add—I do not know that I need any comment from you, but I would add that with the move of NIFA and ERS to Kansas City in the first Trump Administration, that decision was further confirmed by the actions of Secretary Vilsack. There was efforts at one point in time to try to reverse that deci-

sion, which Secretary Vilsack did not do. I do hope that we do better and presumably the times have changed in regard to COVID, but so many USDA employees have worked remotely. We had this conversation when you were in my office seeking my vote for your nomination's confirmation. I am pleased by the efforts that you have described to me then and again today in this hearing about the insistence that federal employees at USDA return to in-person positions. True?

Mr. VADEN. Yes, sir, and one thing I will note of bipartisan agreement during today's hearing is that it appears that Members of both sides of the aisle are sick of Teams meetings and teleworking, and we at USDA are definitely on that bandwagon. We want our employees who need to be in the office in the office.

Senator MORAN. Mr. Secretary, thank you. You mentioned in your earlier comments about NBAF to Senator Marshall. Would you further explore with me and the Committee, you indicated that you recognize some things needed to be done? What do you anticipate those being, and how do you anticipate to accomplish it?

Mr. VADEN. Well, Senator, I know that I need to take a trip out there in order to see it myself, and I have been summarily briefed on some of the challenges that are currently engaged in at NBAF. I have a more in-depth briefing on my calendar after this hearing in the next couple of weeks. After I have had that briefing, I would be more than happy to sit down with you and talk specific.

Senator MORAN. It is a jewel, a gem. I would like to visit with you. I am happy to come to see you. That seems to please you when we make the——

Mr. VADEN. Well, I can——

Senator MORAN [continuing]. trip to your office, and I will do that.

Mr. VADEN [continuing]. come to see you. I was just complimenting Senator Hoeven for his extra effort——

Senator MORAN. I do not want Senator Hoeven to receive any additional consideration than I do.

[Laughter.]

Senator MORAN. I will come see you.

In addition to talking about relocation, I would love to have the conversation about NBAF, a project, the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility that I have been involved in since, I do not know, my days in the House 20-plus years ago.

Thank you, sir.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Schiff.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Vaden, I will not repeat except to say that I share the bipartisan concerns that have been raised about the creation of this plan without input from impacted entities or the Congress. One of the chief messages of USDA proposing this is centered around making USDA offices and services moving closer to American farmers.

I know this will not surprise you, but California is the number one ag-producing state in the union, and yet the proposed hub in place of USDA headquarters will be located in Salt Lake City, which is more than 500 miles from the Central Valley. My understanding is that none of the other five top ag-producing states will enjoy the presence of one of these regional hubs.

My question is, why was not a hub placed closer to the largest ag-producing state or, frankly, any of the other top five agriculture-producing states? Why were not those selected as venues?

Mr. VADEN. Fair question, Senator. First, I want to note just a simple geographic fact. While there are no hub locations in California itself, nearly all of our hub locations are closer to California than everybody being in Washington, DC.

With regard to your point about why California does not have a hub location, the simple answer is cost of living. We were looking at the cost of living for reasons that I noted. We want people to join USDA to build a career, to be able to purchase a home. The hub locations we chose, Salt Lake City being among, believe it or not, the cheapest cost of living on the list, allow that opportunity. Unfortunately, it is more difficult to do that in California with the price of housing.

Senator SCHIFF. There is going to be a huge cost of the relocation of all of the staff, indeed, if staff choose to relocate. In 2019, half of the staff at the two agencies that were part of the then-reorganization plan did not relocate. The GAO, in addition to the point that Senator Warnock made, also found that there was a tremendous loss of expertise in that relocation and that the new hires were very junior and lacked the kind of experience that was lost in that relocation.

Have you done an estimate of what the expected attrition is? If half the employees did not relocate, do you expect to lose half of these employees?

Mr. VADEN. I think the Secretary has spoken to that. We expect to have better results this time around, in part because we learned some lessons from ERS/NIFA. I mentioned some of those earlier in terms of looking for places focused on cost of living, looking at where we actually already were, and had a footprint of USDA employees with whom the new employees could collaborate.

I think that, given what we are trying to sell and the fact that, as you acknowledged, we are looking to build the future of USDA, not just maintain the present, these will provide us with the incentives to get these positions.

Senator SCHIFF. What is your estimate of the attrition? It was 50 percent in the last reorganization. What percentage?

Mr. VADEN. We do not have a specific number to offer at this time.

Senator SCHIFF. Let me raise a broader concern. No regional offices in California. In fact, we are losing in this reorganization an Agriculture Research Service office in California. The \$20 billion in disaster relief, that aid includes a broad authority to deliver assistance through block grants to states. Despite California expressing interest and the legislation having no limits, USDA has announced such a narrow set of qualifications that it essentially excludes all but a few states in the Southeast. Moreover, USDA announced it was rescinding all but one Regional Conservation Partnership Program awards per state, and then all six California awards were canceled. Some of these projects even had the same goals as projects in other states, like my colleague Senator Fetterman in Pennsylvania.

I hope you can understand—and this is not to denigrate from Pennsylvania—just California would like to enjoy the same thing. My question is, all of California's conservation program grants canceled. California does not qualify for disaster assistance on the narrow definition. California gets no regional office. California loses one of the existing offices. It is hard not to perceive this as a political calculation rather than one that is in the best interest of farmers, given our dominance in agriculture. What do you have to say to California farmers who are feeling that the Administration, the President is not representing them, that he is punishing them because the state did not vote for him?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, that is not the case at all. With regard to moving more USDA employees, though not into California, much closer to California than Washington, DC, our employees will have more ready access to your state.

With regard to your notation about the ARS facility, I would note that the proposed closure of it is not a creature of the Secretary's reorganization. It is instead part of the President's budgetary proposal to this body. Of course, I am well aware that Congress holds the power of the purse and they make the final decision on what will get funded.

Finally, with regard to disaster assistance, I know that the first level of the block grant funding that we announced focused on those who had crop insurance and accepting those specialty crop producers who participate in NAP who are eligible for the current round of block grants. Specialty crops were left out. There is a second tranche that was noted and has yet to be announced that is designed to include so-called shallow losses, which, as you know, are losses that are not covered by crop insurance. I would love to talk with you more about that in the future as we move toward rolling out that proposal.

Senator SCHIFF. We will take you up on that invitation, but let me just say this. The fact that the California office is being closed as a budgetary decision rather than as a reorganization position does not give Californians any comfort. They just know they are losing an office and losing access.

In terms of an office in Utah being only 500 miles away, that is also not much of a comfort to California farmers, particularly when California farmers, I think if that is the choice, would rather have the experience of the current USDA employees in Washington than an inexperienced group of new employees in Utah.

Finally, the proof will be in the pudding. Right now, California grants are canceled. Right now, California does not qualify for disaster assistance. You know, however that is justified or rationalized, the proof will be whether resources actually get to California farmers, and that is the standard we will hold the Administration to.

Thank you, Chairman.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Justice.

Senator JUSTICE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Vaden, okay, now listen, you know, I totally understand that people that are being relocated, it can be a stressful time. I get that completely, but let me just say just this. At one time not long ago, our family farm had grown to a size where we were probably really

close to the biggest cash grain farmers east of the Mississippi River, corn, wheat, and soybeans. Would you not think, would you not think of all the Senators of all, I ought to know, I ought to really know what is happening and what is going on because we were farming in multiple states, I ought to really know the pulse of the farmers, the ranchers, the foresters. I ought to know. I mean, for God's sakes a living, of everything in the world that I ought to know about, I ought to know about this.

Now, I can tell you without any question that it would be great if you would have said, we are going to build one of these locations in West Virginia. You know, that would be great because we are close to 2/3 of the population of the country, and our cost of living is great, and, you know, our people are wonderful, and it would have been great. Here is the whole deal, and here is the thing you have just got to ask, so easy. Go ask the farmers, and I am sure you have done exactly that. Go ask the foresters. Go ask the ranchers one question, is it working? They will say, ain't no way. For God's sakes a living, why in the world do we have to run all over the place with our hair on fire going completely buck nuts and everything over just simply just this? It is not working.

Literally, these people have given us so much, it is off the chart. I listened to Coach Tuberville, and Coach, you know, Coach has a real, real understanding because he has the pulse of the people. He is right with the people, and he is right with our farmers. Well, there is nobody. There is nobody in the world that could be more with our farmers than I am, you know.

With all that being said, just absolutely just think. These people have given us innovation. They are the most productive people on the planet, and we are losing them. Coach just said the suicide rate is off the chart. We are losing thousands of farms every year. You are going to lose more this year, right now.

You know, with all that being said, what in the world are we trying to pretend to ourselves that absolutely this thing is working and working in D.C.? What you are saying to the world is all we are trying to do is put these people closer to the pulse, to the pulse of what is going on. We are trying to do it in a way that is equitable in every way, cost of living, you know, great people, great resources, all that stuff. We are trying to do all that.

Now look, I am a white-haired new guy on the block that has done a lot of stuff, and I have done one whale of a lot of just this. Absolutely, I know what is going on in the farm community, the forestry community, our ranching community. I know, and it is high time that we try to do something to reward and help and make easier and everything else for all those people that are busting their you-know-what for all of us every day.

Mr. Chairman, I do not have any questions. I do not have a question one. All I am telling you is absolutely, we absolutely need to move and do the very best that we can for these great people tomorrow.

Anyway, Mr. Chairman, thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Fetterman.

Senator FETTERMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Hello, Mr. Vaden. Now, I am sure you are aware you are an expert in part of this industry. You will probably know that Pennsyl-

vania, that is our largest industry. Now I think we can all agree that, at least in my state, I assume that it is probably nationally, that the vast majority of the parts of my state are very red and they are more aligned with the GOP. For me, and I think we agree that ag is bipartisan, and that is the way I approach this kind of a thing.

Often, you know, I am advocating the kinds of parts in Pennsylvania that just they are maybe not going to vote for, for me because I think it is an incredibly difficult job to be a farmer. I revere in what they do for our Nation.

Today, though, I am here to express my concern because I today am as the voice for the unions that are really, really concerned based by your choice to relocate for me. That is why I really wanted to bring up and, you know, there really was not—you know, I am concerned there really was not any negotiation or anything with the unions for this in advance for that.

When ERA and NIFA were relocated in 2019, workers were promised relocation expenses and incentives. I actually have the signed agreement between them and the union outlining these relocation incentives. I ask unanimous consent that it be entered into the record.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Without objection.

[The letter can be found on pages 54–57 in the appendix.]

Senator FETTERMAN. I do believe the Department walked back a little bit on this promise. Mr. Vaden, I am asking, are you willing to commit to covering all the relocation expenses for the USDA staff who choose to move or are forced because this is part of the plan?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, Congress has a cap that they have put by statute on the maximum amount of relocation assistance that we can provide. However, within that range, we do have quite a lot of flexibility. As I mentioned earlier in the hearing, it is our intent to cover these employees' expenses within the bounds set by Congress.

Senator FETTERMAN. Thank you. That is a great answer.

Mr. Vaden, I appreciate the Department being available for a staff briefing yesterday. I just really want to make sure that the voice of the union here is—and I really want to have more—and to commit to more union engagement through all this. I would like to invite you to help facilitate meetings with the union leaders and those other members to be more a part of this process. I assume that you are open to that.

Mr. VADEN. Absolutely.

Senator FETTERMAN. Okay. Now, in my last minute, are you familiar with the spotted lantern fly?

Mr. VADEN. Yes, sir. As a matter of fact, I saw some in Washington, DC, last week, sadly.

Senator FETTERMAN. Yes. Oh, yes. I love stomping them. You know, I am a great Pennsylvanian and a great American. Wherever I see them, it is like, stomp it, stomp it, stomp it.

Mr. VADEN. Well, you will be glad to know that I did some of that myself down near city center.

Senator FETTERMAN. Yes, no, and of course, I mean, that is really a concern about that invasive species. We want to make sure—it

seems like now you are aware of it. You know, can we ensure that Pennsylvania farmers from the lantern fly control programs will not be interrupted?

Mr. VADEN. Senator, as part of the Secretary's reorganization proposal, it specifically notes the importance of ensuring that nothing interferes with the important work APHIS does, whether we are looking at New World screwworm or whether we are looking at the spotted lantern fly or whether we are looking at a future threat to come. Everything that we do will be implemented in a way that does not affect APHIS' important work in this area.

The final point that I would note on that is nearly all of the people who are involved in battling these invasive species are already on the frontline and not located in Washington, DC.

Senator FETTERMAN. Okay. Thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Ernst.

Senator ERNST. Thank you, Chairman Boozman, for holding this hearing today.

Welcome back to the Committee, Deputy Secretary Vaden. It is good to have you here.

I am actually really excited about this hearing and the opportunity. Secretary Vaden, I have spoken with you and Secretary Rollins at length about this issue that we are talking about today. First, getting our folks back into the office, that has been really important to me. Consolidating or selling off unused office space and moving USDA closer to those it is meant to serve, which is our farmers and our rural communities. Again, just want to thank you for making this a priority.

As you know, the status quo is forcing taxpayers to foot the bill for billions in deferred maintenance. We do not hear a lot of that talked about, but there is deferred maintenance and there are the ongoing operating costs, all for buildings that are almost entirely empty. Just last week, 78 percent of the seats in the USDA South building were not filled. However, this represents a significant improvement from the past number of years.

When Secretary Vilsack sat in that very seat that you are sitting in today, a year ago, a year ago, he denied evidence exposed by the GAO revealing the USDA headquarters building had an 11 percent utilization rate in 2023. He also said the whistleblower letter that I received, "isn't even close to correct" to the USDA building usage at that time. Well, folks, Secretary Vilsack lied.

Thanks to this Administration's dedication to transparency, I actually have the data to back that up. In February 2024, as Secretary Vilsack testified before this Committee and told us there was nothing to see here, USDA's three main Washington, DC, office buildings had barely over 13 percent of their seats filled.

Unfortunately for taxpayers, USDA is not the only agency holding onto unaffordable properties that are nearly vacant. This includes nearly 7,700 vacant federal buildings and another 2,200 that are largely empty. To fix this, the Senate must pass my For Sale Act to dispose of underutilized buildings, including the Ag South building, and to return the money from those sales to the taxpayers. We need more of these agencies to follow Secretary Rollins' and USDA's lead. With that being said, that is a great plug for my For Sale Act.

Deputy Secretary Vaden, I find it interesting. We really have not heard any outrage from our colleagues when it comes to the Biden Administration, when they kept USDA's workforce almost entirely remote and our offices sat empty. Yet now we are starting to hear all of those concerns about relocating positions into the very communities that USDA is supposed to serve. My question, I would love to hear your thoughts on this. Can you expand on the main factors that led to the USDA to consolidate offices in the D.C. region and move those positions to the other states?

Mr. VADEN. Well, Senator, first, let me thank you for your leadership on this issue because you were focusing on telework, the inefficiencies it created, and the vastly empty government buildings that dot the District of Columbia before it was cool. Thank you for doing that.

Like you, I got a chuckle when I read the letter that was sent to me Monday night with the concerns expressed about meetings only done by telework and who is going to be at the Department manning the store. As you well know, that was the Biden Administration. That was USDA for the past four years. Drive by the Whitten building. Drive by the South building. The parking lots were empty.

Here in the Trump Administration, we want people in the office. As you have noted, even when we have got all of our employees in the office, we are still not reaching the congressionally mandated threshold of 60 percent occupancy. That is not a high bar. That still leaves 40 percent vacant. With regard to the South building, on high-attendance Sunday—they used to call it at my church—we hit 36.9 percent.

Senator ERNST. That is the high mark.

Mr. VADEN. That is barely half of what Congress has mandated that building should hold, which, again, is only 60 percent in order for us to keep it.

What drove our consideration was fairness to the taxpayer, asking them, can we really expect them to foot the bill for a building that is largely empty? Obviously, in the executive branch, we are charged with carrying out the laws that Congress passed. You made your intent incredibly clear when you passed the Use It Act by a vote of 97 to 1 in the U.S. Senate, and we are following it.

Senator ERNST. I am so thankful for that. I am glad that we are actually going through this exercise now to move more of our folks out to the people that they should be serving, our farmers and our rural communities.

I am going to also add to the record, Senator Marshall was talking about Kansas State University being the first land-grant institution. I will note that Iowa was the first state to accept the Morrill Act of 1862, which established our land-grant universities. Iowa State University was the first institution to open its doors to co-ed students. Thank you.

Thank you. I yield back.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you.

Thank you again, Deputy Secretary Vaden, for your time and insight today and again, doing this on very, very short notice.

The hearing record will remain open for five business days. That concludes our hearing, and it is now adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:57 p.m., the Committee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

JULY 30, 2025

**U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Full Committee Hearing
Review of the USDA Reorganization Proposal
July 30, 2025**

The Honorable Stephen Alexander Vaden
Testimony

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for your invitation to discuss the U.S. Department of Agriculture's July 24, 2025 memorandum regarding planned optimization, consolidation, and reorganization efforts.

I committed to engaging with Congress and appreciate your near instant interest to publicly provide feedback to ensure our nation's farmers, ranchers, foresters, and consumers receive the service and support the Department is mandated to provide, all while respecting the generosity of the American taxpayer.

President Trump made clear his second term would include relocating the sprawling federal bureaucracy to locations outside the National Capital Region. The Department's July 24 memorandum begins to deliver on this promise and does so in a way that right sizes the USDA footprint, eliminates unnecessary management layers, consolidates redundant or duplicative functions, and most importantly, allows USDA to deliver on its mission to the American people within the bounds of its available financial resources.

Over the course of the last four years, the Department has seen its budget explode. The prior administration not only burdened the taxpayer through questionable policymaking but also by hiring thousands of employees and maintaining a massive real estate footprint that USDA's budget could not support. If any business or farm family managed its resources the way USDA did the prior four years, it would be bankrupt.

All USDA employees began to work remotely in March 2020 and continued to do so for more than 1,700 days. Upon President Trump's inauguration, employees returned to the office. The Department's success depends on collaboration and community, not remote work at home or desks in secluded, small spaces. Nothing will curtail 163 years of institutional knowledge and USDA's commitment to America's farm families and rural communities.

I am pleased with the groundwork the Secretary has laid over the last several months, and together we look forward to implementing this plan to bring the Department back to the people whom it serves. But again, this is an initial step, not the final one. Your feedback, and that of our employees, is welcomed.

Again, thank you for inviting me to testify to discuss the Department's proposal. I look forward to receiving your questions.



THE SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE
WASHINGTON, D. C.
20250-0100

July 24, 2025

Secretary Memorandum: SM 1078-015

Subject: Department of Agriculture Reorganization Plan

Section 1. **Purpose:** This Secretary Memorandum authorizes and directs the actions necessary to effectuate the consolidation, unification, and optimization of functions within the Department of Agriculture (USDA) to achieve improved effectiveness and accountability, enhanced services, reduced bureaucracy and cost savings for the American people. These actions constitute the USDA Department Reorganization Plan.

Section 2. **Authority:** This Memorandum is issued under the authority of Reorganization Plan No. 2 of 1953 (5 U.S.C. app.; 7 U.S.C. 2201 note) and The Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994 (Pub. L. 103-354).

Section 3. **Background:** Since its legislated establishment in 1862, USDA has been known as "The People's Department," a title reflecting its mission to serve farmers, ranchers, landowners, and rural communities, and perform critical public services that benefit all Americans. The Department is reverting to its core mission to ensure:

- American agriculture feeds all across the United States and the world.
- American farmers, ranchers, and producers compete on a world stage that is fair, just, and on terms that put America First.
- Confidence in our programs to fight disease, feed the needy, manage our land and forests, and work for all of American agriculture.
- That Make America Great Again and Make America Healthy Again exist not in opposition to one another, but as complements to a common mission for our country.

Section 4. **Key Pillars:** USDA is committed to preserving critical public safety and other public services the American public relies upon. Reductions and impacts to wildland firefighting, inspection, and farmer and rural community front-line facing positions will be minimized. The USDA Reorganization Plan will be guided by four key pillars:

Principle 1: Ensure the Size of USDA's Workforce Aligns with Financial Resources and Priorities

Over the last four years, USDA's workforce grew by approximately 8% and employees' salaries increased by 14.5%. Many of these salaries were funded by temporary funding. As part of this reorganization, USDA is not conducting a large-scale workforce reduction. To make certain USDA can afford its workforce, this reorganization is another step of the Department's process of reducing its workforce. Much of this reduction was through voluntary retirements and the Deferred Retirement Program (DRP), a completely voluntary tool. As of today, 15,364 individuals voluntarily elected deferred resignation. This re-alignment will be undertaken to mitigate adverse consequences to those agencies which rely upon temporary workforces that increase at different times of the year. Examples include Forest Service increases during the spring and summer months due to wildland firefighting, Agricultural Marketing Service increases due to agricultural product grading activities during harvest time, and field-based agricultural activities involving the Farm Production and Conservation Mission Area.

USDA has and will continue to fully leverage voluntary programs such as the Deferred Resignation Program (DRP), Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA) and Voluntary Separation Incentive Payments (VSIPs). The Department will also leverage directed and voluntary reassignments to ensure the workforce is aligned with mission priorities. Focused and limited Reductions in Force will be implemented only if needed and only after approval by USDA's Deputy Secretary.

Principle 2: Bring USDA Closer to Its Customers by Relocating Resources Outside of the National Capital Region

The Department currently employs approximately 4,600 individuals that work within the National Capital Region (NCR). This Region has one of the highest costs of living in the country, with a federal salary locality rate of 33.94%. To ensure USDA is located closer to the people it serves while achieving savings to the American taxpayer, USDA will relocate much of its Agency headquarters and NCR staff from the Washington, D.C. area to five hub locations. The selection of these hub locations takes into consideration existing concentrations of USDA employees and the cost of living for USDA employees. At the conclusion of implementation, it is USDA's goal to retain no more than 2,000 employees within the NCR.

The five hub locations and current Federal locality rates are:

- 1) Raleigh, North Carolina (22.24%)
- 2) Kansas City, Missouri (18.97%)
- 3) Indianapolis, Indiana (18.15%)
- 4) Fort Collins, Colorado (30.52%)
- 5) Salt Lake City, Utah (17.06%)

In addition to these five hubs, USDA will maintain two additional core administrative support locations: Albuquerque, New Mexico and Minneapolis, Minnesota. These two locations have substantial concentrations of human resources staff that support the delivery of critical public safety

functions. USDA will continue to maintain critical service centers and laboratories including agency service centers in St. Louis, Missouri; Lincoln, Nebraska; and Missoula, Montana.

Regarding existing facilities within the NCR:

Whitten Building: this facility will be retained as USDA's headquarters.

Yates Building: this facility will be retained for use and USDA will fully leverage available office space for USDA mission areas and staff offices.

National Agricultural Library: retained for use, and the Department will fully leverage available office space for USDA mission areas and staff offices.

South Building: this facility will be vacated.

Braddock Place: this facility will be vacated.

Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC): this facility will be vacated over multiple years to avoid disruption of critical USDA research activities.

George Washington Carver Center (GWCC): this facility will be sold or transferred upon conclusion of its use as a temporary location for USDA personnel during the re-alignment of USDA offices and personnel

Principle 3: Eliminating Management Layers and Bureaucracy

The Department will reduce or eliminate stand-alone regional offices and other similar bureaucratic management layers. To promote coordination across USDA, regional offices and other similar management layers will be co-located in the hub locations to the greatest extent possible.

- The Agriculture Research Service will eliminate its Area Offices. Residual functions will be performed by its Office of National Programs.
- The National Agricultural Statistics Service will consolidate its 12 existing regions into five USDA Hubs over a multi-year period.
- The Food and Nutrition Service will reduce its number of regions from seven to five and align locations with the USDA Hubs and Service Centers over a two-year period
- The Forest Service will phase out the nine Regional Offices over the next year and implementation activities will take into consideration the ongoing fire season. The Forest Service will maintain a reduced state office in Juneau, Alaska and an eastern service center in Athens, Georgia. The current stand-alone Research Stations will be consolidated into a single location in Fort Collins, Colorado. The Forest Service will retain the Fire Sciences Lab and Forest Products Lab – the former, vital for protection from forest fires and the latter, critical for assessing market development opportunities for timber and other forest products and related industries.
- The Natural Resources Conservation Service will align its regional structure with the five USDA hub locations.
- Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service centers will remain at current locations as they are located in USDA hub locations.

Principle 4: Consolidate Support Functions

To reduce duplication and provide consistency across USDA, support functions will be consolidated. Mission area and agency resources will be realigned to the consolidated functions.

The Department will:

- Consolidate civil rights functions into the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, which will deliver all statutorily required civil rights functions.
- Consolidate Freedom of Information Act and related information management functions within the Office of General Counsel.
- Consolidate Legislative Affairs functions into the Office of Congressional Relations.
- To the maximum extent practicable, consolidate communication and public affairs functions within the Office of Communication.
- Eliminate the duplication and redundancy between the Office of Budget and Program Analysis and the Office of the Chief Financial Officer and streamline budget and financial operations across USDA.
- Where possible and appropriate, complete information technology consolidation activities with services fully provided by the Office of the Chief Information Officer.
- Consolidate tribal relations functions within mission areas and ensure the Office of Tribal Relations delivers all statutorily required tribal relations functions.
- Consolidate human resources functions in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Administration (ASA). Although human resources will be consolidated, agencies will still have focused hiring support including a dedicated team for wildland firefighting hiring.
- Consolidate contracting functions in the ASA. Although contracting resources will be consolidated, dedicated teams for commodity procurement and wildland firefighting incident support will continue to exist. The Department will transfer contracting for common goods and services to the General Services Administration during FY 2026. To eliminate redundancy, the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business will be reduced to a single position that focuses on statutory requirements.
- Consolidate lease administration and management functions in the ASA.
- Consolidate grants and financial assistance to provide better controls and promote efficiency. This consolidation will include, where feasible, the transfer of grant making and administration functions from USDA offices and agencies that currently have limited capacity to perform such duties to other offices and agencies.
- Eliminate the redundancy in student programs in the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE) and the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) by realigning OPPE student programs to ARS.

Section 5. Implementation:

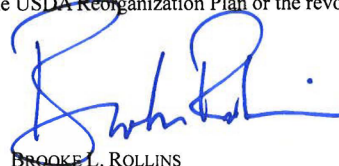
- a. **Deputy Secretary.** The Deputy Secretary will lead the implementation of the USDA Reorganization Plan and may make changes or adjustments to the plan as needed.

- b. **The Office of the General Counsel and the ASA.** The Office of the General Counsel and the Office of the ASA are directed to take all necessary steps to support the Deputy Secretary in implementation of the USDA Reorganization Plan
- c. **The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations.** The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations is directed to work with the Office of General Counsel on all necessary Congressional notifications.
- d. **Agency Heads and Department Officials.** Under Secretaries, Agency Heads, and Department Officials are directed to take all necessary actions to implement the USDA Reorganization Plan as directed by the Deputy Secretary.

Section 6. **Effect of the Memorandum:** The implementation of this Secretary Memorandum will improve the internal management of the Department. This Secretary Memorandum and any resulting actions do not confer any right or benefit (substantive or procedural) to any party. To the extent there is any inconsistency between the provisions of this Secretary Memorandum and any Federal law or regulation, the provisions of such law or regulation will control.

Section 7. **Delegation:** This Memorandum delegates to the Deputy Secretary all authorities necessary to implement the USDA Reorganization Plan.

Section 8. **Expiration Date:** This Secretary Memorandum is effective immediately and will remain in effect until the earlier of the completion of the USDA Reorganization Plan or the revocation of this memorandum.



BROOKE L. ROLLINS
Secretary of Agriculture



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July 29, 2025

This letter was sent to Senator Boozman, Chair, and Amy Klobuchar, Ranking Member, of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry

We are extremely concerned about the recent reorganization announcement by the Secretary of Agriculture that would, among other things, eliminate all nine regional Forest Service offices and consolidate Research leadership at a single location. We are not opposed to reorganization that is carefully planned to actually improve efficiency and deliver sound resource management and services to the public and our partners.

We are the National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR) and represent many hundreds of former Forest Service employees in every state. As a group, NAFSR offers many decades of experience in natural resource management as well as organizational change. As a highly active advocacy organization we have achieved many positive results over the years. We are a credible voice with many in Congress, and with several other organizations that have profound interest in natural resource issues.

Over time, the Forest Service has considered consolidating Regional Offices. During earlier transformation efforts, the work going on at regional offices, including roles, responsibilities and workflows, was carefully analyzed. The analysis found that Regional Offices have at least three different roles: expertise support to forests; budget responsibilities; and external relationships. Some of this work might be consolidated (an alternative with three regions was considered), or redefined and reorganized, but not simply omitted.

**National Association of
Forest Service Retirees**

**Box 277362
Ft. Collins, CO 80527**

nafsr.org

Four recent mergers of research stations damaged external relationships because station program leaders faced demands to meet with a larger portfolio of partners and constituents, and constrained travel budgets limited trips to more distant parts of the new station's larger territory. Consequently, leaders attended fewer regional scientific and professional meetings and met with key state and university partners less frequently than previous station leaders who were responsible for smaller geographic areas.

The reduced visibility of and access to Forest Service research leaders damaged partnerships and cramped science delivery tailored to local forest conditions. In addition, the proposed Hubs do not include a location in the East (specifically northeastern and mid-Atlantic regions) that are uniquely different from the South.

We urge the Committee to focus on some key questions related to how any new structures compare to the current in terms of the agency's ability to deliver the mission with its local partners and how such changes will affect constituents who rely on those services.

The first question is "what is a better and more efficient way of organizing the work and delivering results constituents need —whether the work is managing national forests or conducting research?"

The second is "what is a way to transition to a new organization with a minimum of impact on ongoing work, budgetary expenditures, relationships with externals, and morale?"

Ever since the Forest Service budget crisis of last Fall, employees have been suffering increased workloads. Coupled with firings, threats of future layoffs, and the loss of employees due to VERA and other retirement options, employees are stretched to their limits. We hear their voices saying, "Enough! Allow us to focus on our work!"

NAFSR believes that this is not the time for massive dislocation. This is the time for assessing the changes that have already occurred and mitigating the gaps that are keeping employees from doing the important work funded by Congress.

There is no doubt that some reorganization may be beneficial but learning from previous efforts and taking the time to get it right, and to carefully plan for a transition, will ultimately pay off in an organization that is more efficient, effective and with better public service. Indeed, relationships with States, Tribes and other partners are crucial to getting the work done, and we believe that they should provide input into any reorganization.

The Forest Service has been an evolving agency from day one, driven by changes in the country's needs, communications and technology, and yes, direction from the Administration *with* agreement and funding from Congress. There will always be a need for ongoing organizational improvement, but it needs to be done in a way that considers the work that needs to be done and provides for our employees' workload and well-being.

We do not see anything in the proposal that would improve services or efficiency. Rather, it appears to simply cut staffing and funding without describing how the work will continue to get done. It provides the classic direction to do more with less.

Given NAFSR's extensive experience with the work of the Forest Service and with previous reorganization efforts, we remain willing to contribute our vast knowledge and provide input for any thoughtful workforce realignment process.

Sincerely,

Steve Ellis

Steve Ellis, Chair
National Association of Forest Service Retirees



AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO

Eric Bunn Sr.
National Secretary-Treasurer

Dr. Everett B. Kelley
National President

Dr. Kendrick B. Roberson
NVP for Women & Fair Practices

July 28, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman
Chair
United States Senate Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member
United States Senate Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Washington, DC 2510

Chair Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the more than 800,000 federal and D.C. government workers represented by the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), including thousands at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), we submit this statement for the record to express our strong opposition to USDA's reorganization and workforce relocation plan.

Relocating more than half of USDA's Washington, D.C.-based workforce, including critical employees from the Economic Research Service (ERS), the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), and the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), would pose a direct and catastrophic threat to our nation's food supply, to the farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural interests who rely on the Department for a multitude of services, and the value and integrity of the scientific that informs modern agriculture in areas such as crop yield optimization, the development of disease-resistant fruits and vegetables, and sustainable farming practices.

The relocation plan is not about bringing services "closer to the people." It is a deliberate dismantling of core federal capabilities that have protected and nourished the American public for over a century. The ERS and NIFA are essential scientific agencies that conduct vital agricultural, climate, and economic research. FSIS safeguards the safety of our meat and poultry supply. Forcing these employees to relocate under threat of job loss will not strengthen service delivery but rather destroy it.

USDA's 2019 relocation of ERS and NIFA to Kansas City resulted in a mass exodus of experienced scientists. Over half of the staff resigned or retired, leaving years of research projects abandoned. The agency never recovered its full capacity. This new relocation effort—far broader in scope—will repeat and amplify that damage, not just for ERS and NIFA, but also for FSIS and other critical mission areas.

Federal scientists, economists, and public health experts will not simply pick up and move at the snap of a finger. The affected federal employees will consider the needs of their families and their community roots. Losing the deep knowledge developed over the course of time participating in longstanding institutional teams and systems will be enormously costly in terms of both dollars and ability to carry out the Department's mission. This relocation plan will not "reposition" these employees, it will drive them out of public service altogether.





AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO

Eric Bunn Sr.
National Secretary-Treasurer

Dr. Everett B. Kelley
National President

Dr. Kendrick B. Roberson
NVP for Women & Fair Practices

Many USDA workers facing relocation are nearing retirement or have spent decades building their expertise. Others are mid-career scientists who will be forced to abandon the federal mission entirely for private or academic jobs rather than uproot their families for lower pay in unfamiliar locations. Once lost, that talent cannot be replaced overnight—if ever.

The hollowing out of USDA's scientific workforce is not a theoretical risk. It is a documented outcome, backed by workforce attrition data from the department's last relocation attempt. This plan threatens to permanently degrade USDA's ability to deliver science-based solutions to the climate crisis, global food insecurity, farm resiliency, and economic development in rural America.

USDA claims, without justification or explanation, that this reorganization is about efficiency and cost savings. The fact is that BARC is already a highly efficient and productive agency. There is not a U.S. farmer or agribusiness that does not benefit on BARC's cutting edge research ensuring that America remains the breadbasket of the world.

AFGE urges Congress to halt this harmful and unnecessary reorganization and calls for:

1. An immediate pause on all forced relocations and RIFs until comprehensive employee impact assessments and cost-benefit analyses are completed and reviewed by Congress.
2. Full transparency and bargaining with employee unions under federal labor law.
3. Investment in teleworking, flexible work arrangements, and retention incentives instead of mass relocations.

This is not simply a geographic reshuffling. This is a dismantling of our nation's capacity to serve its farmers, protect its food, and respond to climate and economic crises with scientific precision and public accountability. It is a decision that places ideology over integrity, and politics over the people who depend on USDA's critical mission.

AFGE stands ready to work with Congress to protect our workforce, preserve public service, and ensure USDA's future is rooted not in displacement, but in investment.

Sincerely,

Everett B. Kelley
National President



numerous other agency functions at headquarters. We urge the committee to secure confirmation from USDA that FAS operations will remain in D.C. so that they can most effectively promote international markets for U.S. farmers.

In his testimony to the committee, Deputy Secretary Vaden acknowledged this reorganization plan would result in a reduction in the overall workforce as thousands of workers are either unable or unwilling to move away from their families and community. Secretary Rollins is committed to the administration's reckless goal of reducing the federal workforce for political reasons, not to improve agency operations. The Secretary has bragged about eliminating more than 15,000 USDA employees and has repeatedly denigrated the value of their work. This is not a good-faith reorganization plan, but rather a continuation of both Elon Musk's DOGE and Project 2025's slash-and-burn approach to dismantling the federal workforce and essential federal programs, disregarding institutional knowledge and expertise within the workforce and the value of the programs themselves.

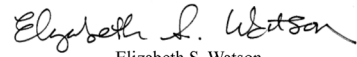
Secretary Rollins has said she is moving forward at "warp speed." She did not consult with Congress when developing this plan, and appears to be fast-tracking, possibly within 30 days, a skeleton plan to eliminate no less than 2,600 jobs in the D.C. area, by reducing the current workforce of 4,600 employees to no more than 2,000, and relocate those jobs across the country in Colorado, Indiana, Missouri, North Carolina and Utah. Presumably, this will also eliminate the jobs of USDA employees in regional offices, including seven Food and Nutrition Service offices that provide technical support and guidance to states and localities regarding the complex provisions of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) administration. OBBA made significant changes to SNAP administration, and without proper guidance, states may believe they are forced to opt out of SNAP if they cannot comply with the state match. Further, they may not have the technical support needed to address error rates. This would harm millions of Americans nationwide who rely on SNAP for their families' basic needs.

AFSCME urges the committee to provide oversight over the USDA's plan and transparency to impacted federal workers by:

1. Requesting an immediate pause on all forced relocations and Reductions-in-Force (RIFs) until comprehensive employee impact assessments and cost-benefit analyses are completed and reviewed by the relevant committees in Congress.
2. Providing full transparency and bargaining with employee unions under federal labor law.
3. Increasing agency investment in teleworking, flexible work arrangements and retention incentives, instead of mass relocations, to ensure the most efficient and effective possible USDA workforce.

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to supporting the federal workers who support our agricultural industry, forestlands and nutrition programs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elizabeth S. Watson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "E" and "W".

Elizabeth S. Watson
Director of Federal Government Affairs

ESW/CB:lm



122 C Street NW, Suite 325
 Washington, DC 20001
southernenvironment.org

T 202 828 8382
 F 202 347 6041

30 July 2025

The Honorable John Boozman

Chair, U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
 328A Russell Senate Office Building
 Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar

Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
 328A Russell Senate Office Building
 Washington, DC 20510

Re: Letter for the Record concerning the July 30th Full Committee Review of the USDA's
 Reorganization Proposal

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar,

The Southern Environmental Law Center writes to express serious concern about the USDA's recently announced reorganization plan, which your Members plan to hear testimony about today. This plan would further erode capacity by closing critical research facilities - including the extraordinarily valuable Southern Research Station in Asheville, NC - and negatively impact the ecological and recreational values of Southern Forests. Alarming, it does all this while skirting Congressional oversight.

Additionally, the USDA's reorganization plan risks substantial cuts to agricultural and forest research—work that is foundational to ensuring U.S. leadership in food security, public health, climate resilience, pest and disease control, and nutrition science.

These impacts follow a massive attrition of USDA staff, and the proposed changes include shuttering the agency's regional offices and firing even more dedicated public lands workers. The already-understaffed Forest Service has lost thousands of workers in the last six months, losing nearly 10 percent of its staff. Dispersal of staff will cause further attrition and jeopardizes conservation programs and thus will negatively impact the enjoyment of those who rely on our public forests to hike, hunt, paddle, and fish with their families and friends.

It would also harm forest health initiatives. As referenced above, closing Asheville's Southern Research Station means losing an extremely valuable tool for studying how forest management practice interact with private and working lands, and how to better help protect communities from natural disasters. Recently, the Southern Research Station has been working with other organizations to study fire risk in the wake of Hurricane Helene.

Today's hearing provides an essential opportunity to thoroughly vet this reorganization before irreversible decisions are made. It also allows the agency to be reminded of longstanding General Guidelines for Reprogramming that require agencies funded by the Congressional Appropriations to submit reorganization proposals for review prior to implementation.

We appreciate your attention to this matter and thank you for noticing today's hearing. This is an issue of critical importance to the millions of forest users in the Southeast, to say nothing of the communities who rely on these public lands for clean water, clean air, and outdoor recreation opportunities. SELC stands ready to help you as you move forward with this important oversight.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sam Evans". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Sam" and last name "Evans" clearly distinguishable.

Sam Evans
Senior Attorney and Leader of the National Forests and Parks Program

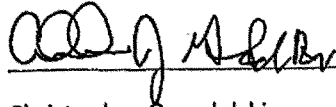
Agreement between the ERS and AFGE Local 3403 in regard to the ERS Relocation

1. The Parties agree that a designated Union representative will be afforded an opportunity to submit questions in advance of and during any future Agency Q&A sessions regarding the ERS relocation. The Agency agrees that if there are follow-up questions after any such session, to provide responses to a designated Union representative in writing.
2. At this time, the Agency agrees with the Union's position that it is in the best interest of ERS employees whose duty station is Washington, DC to be located in the USDA South Building. The Agency agrees to request adequate workspace in the USDA South Building for employees who travel to Washington, DC.
3. The Agency agrees to consider all detail requests using its existing evaluation criteria including that such details serve both the interest of the Agency and detailee as determined by Agency leadership. The Agency will continue to consider details during the transition period of the Agency relocation and convey to potential host agencies the requirement to reimburse the Agency for all details and that any ERS employee who has accepted the relocation and has received a letter of directed reassignment will have his/her duty station updated to Kansas City on 9/30/2019, but will have the option to continue the detail through the agreed upon detail end date. The authority to approve requests for details normally rests with the Division Director.
4. The Agency agrees that Reasonable Accommodation (RA) requests, supported by acceptable medical documentation, will be processed as soon as practical; generally the timeframe for approval is within twenty (20) days but no longer than thirty (30) days from the date the request is submitted. If a decision can be made immediately or in less than 20 days, it must be. All Agency employees for whom an RA may be applicable, including those who are considering whether to accept the directed reassignment, are encouraged to contact Tonya Morris, current Agency RA Program Coordinator at tonya.b.morris@usda.gov for guidance regarding RA laws and requirements keeping in mind that the Agency RA Program Manager has no authority to approve or deny requests. The authority to approve requests for RA's normally rests with the first line supervisor.
5. The Agency agrees to continue existing approved RA arrangements and consider extensions for temporary RA arrangements where the current duty station is other than Washington, DC to the extent that the accommodation remains effective, medically necessary, and such continuation does not interfere with the mission of the Agency. RA arrangements will continue to be re-evaluated periodically by a medical professional per standard RA practices.
6. The Agency agrees to consider individual requests for workplace flexibilities during a transitional period until September 3, 2019 for those employees who have agreed to relocate. A workplace flexibility may include, but is not limited to, working remotely from an approved worksite other than your official duty station, which will be Kansas City effective 9/30/19 for all employees who accepted directed reassignment for that date. The transitional period is defined

as a period of three (3) months (September 30, 2019 through December 30, 2019) with the option for additional extensions which will require approval by the Agency.

7. The Agency agrees to provide temporary housing for Agency employees who have accepted the directed reassignment for sixty (60) days and to facilitate a request for extensions of up to sixty (60) additional days; not to exceed 120 days if needed, and consistent with existing criteria for temporary housing during a relocation.
8. The Agency agrees to request the appropriate approval to offer a relocation incentive payment equal to one (1) month's salary for positions who accepted the directed reassignment to Kansas City to fill positions that are deemed difficult to fill per OPM guidelines and/or Agency leadership. If approved, the employee must sign an agreement to remain at the official duty station in Kansas City for a period of no less than one (1) year. The relocation incentive payment will be paid to employees who accept the relocation incentive offer after a six (6) month period of acceptable performance at the official duty station in Kansas City.
9. The Agency affirms that employees may choose to change their response to the directed reassignment letter at any point prior to or on September 27, 2019.
10. The Agency agrees to provide a private space for nursing mothers in the Beacon building as well as at the new permanent location in Kansas City. The private space will be shielded from view, and free from any intrusion from co-workers or the public.
11. The Agency agrees that if Agency workspace planning committees are formed for both the ERS South Building space and the permanent ERS location in Kansas City, the Union will be afforded an opportunity to suggest appropriate bargaining unit employees to participate in such committees.
12. The Parties' agreement to this MOA confirms conclusion of negotiations on the relocation of ERS to Kansas City.

For the Agency:



Christopher Grondalski

Chief Negotiator

Labor Relations Officer, REE

8/9/19

Date

EPHRAIM LEIBTAG

Digitally signed by EPHRAIM LEIBTAG

Date: 2019.08.09 16:05:51 -04'00'

Dr. Ephraim Leibtag

Date

Acting Administrator, ERS



Peter Themelis

Labor Relations Specialist, ARS

8/9/19

Date

For the Union:

Peter F. Winch

Peter Winch

Chief Negotiator

AFGE, Local 3403

8/9/19

Date

Kevin Hunt

Kevin Hunt

Acting Vice President, ERS

AFGE, Local 3403

8/9/2019

Date

Laura Dodson

Laura Dodson

Union Steward, ERS

AFGE, Local 3403

8-9-19

Date

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

JULY 30, 2025

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Review of the USDA Reorganization Proposal
July 30, 2025
Questions for the Record
The Honorable Stephen Vaden

Senator Amy Klobuchar

1. **Written impact analyses:** As I requested in my July 28, 2025, letter to you, provide:
 - a. Any written analyses conducted on the reorganization's potential impacts on USDA's ability to effectively administer grants like disaster assistance and other financial assistance like loans and cooperative agreements to farmers and rural communities;
 - b. Any written analyses conducted on the reorganization's potential impacts on USDA's research functions vital to farmers, including on animal diseases such as avian flu and New World screwworm;
 - c. Any written analyses conducted on the reorganization's potential impacts on USDA's ability to effectively administer nutrition assistance programs for Americans;
 - d. Any additional analyses conducted on the potential impacts of the reorganization plan, including any cost-benefit and civil rights analyses.

Response: USDA will share analyses where appropriate.

2. **Timeline:** As I requested in my July 28, 2025 letter to you, provide a timeline of planned employee notification and engagement for each USDA mission area and agency and office.

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders and the public to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Any employee notification will occur subsequent to the close of the comment period. All stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, are encouraged to provide feedback by emailing reorganization@usda.gov.

3. **Regional Hubs:** USDA's reorganization plan states that its goal is to move the agency closer to the farmers it serves, but 90 percent of the USDA is already outside of the D.C. region and the consolidation and closure of regional offices will mean hubs are farther away for many farmers.

- a. Which mission areas and agencies and offices will be relocating to one of the five new headquarters? Please provide a list of mission areas and agencies and offices that will be moving from their current locations and which locations they will be moving to.

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to relocation will be made and announced after the comment period closes.

- b. Does USDA plan to move other staff from other states outside of the National Capital Region to the new hub locations?

Response: As outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025, USDA is soliciting input on moving staff from certain regional offices that are outside the National Capital Region to hub locations or other locations.

- c. Please provide a list for each state of how many employees will be required to relocate and the place to which they will be required to move.

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. At this time no decision has been made on the number of employees who will be required to relocate and the state on which they will be required to relocate.

- d. Has USDA calculated whether, after all the offices and mission areas throughout the United States have been shuffled into the 5 hubs, there will be a cost savings?

Response: Final estimates will not be available until after the comment period and further consultations are complete.

4. **Effect of Relocation:** GAO's report on the Economic Research Service and National Institute of Food and Agriculture relocation to Kansas City noted that USDA did not properly account for attrition-related costs in assessing cost-savings. Have you taken the costs GAO identified in that report into account in your analyses for the July 24 relocation plan?

Response: Yes.

5. **Deferred Maintenance:** During Wednesday's hearing you stated that USDA will save at least \$2.2 billion by leaving the National Capital Region facilities due to the deferred maintenance on those buildings. USDA's FY2019 Explanatory Notes states that there were approximately \$145 million in deficiencies at that time related to the USDA Headquarters Complex and George Washington Carver Center (GWCC).

a. Please provide in detail the costs included in the \$2.2 billion figure.

Response: The deferred maintenance estimate is based on the following:
South Building Deferred Maintenance: \$1.322 billion
Whitten Building Deferred Maintenance: \$601 million
BARC Deferred Maintenance: \$300 million

USDA has requested funding from Congress to modernize the buildings entrusted to our care. The Department has had challenges in securing the appropriate funding to keep pace with the costs of caring for and modernizing our facilities, that are historic buildings.

Over the course of the past decade, Congress has rescinded over \$73M of the Agriculture Buildings and Facilities accounts, as well as rescinded or repurposed \$723M of the nonrecurring expense fund that is used to maintain, operate and modernize the facilities.

b. Please provide a breakdown on the category of deferred maintenance similar to previous budget proposals (e.g., energy efficiency, health/safety, space utilization).

Response: Limited renovation and modernization have occurred in these facilities, with resources primarily dedicated to keeping the facilities operational. As a result, space in the buildings is not optimized for modern office work and the utilization rate for the buildings does not achieve the USE IT ACT threshold. The resulting inefficiency means the Department is spending relatively high amounts to maintain basic operations.

c. Does USDA pay a lease to GSA for the South Building or GWCC? If so, what annual amount?

Response: No. The South Building is GSA-owned but USDA operated and maintained. GWCC is USDA owned, and USDA maintained.

6. **Public comment:** On August 1, USDA announced that it was opening up a public comment period beginning on August 1 through August 26, for a period of 26 days, for members of the public, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and stakeholders.

- a. Will USDA be making the comments related to the reorganization plan received via the email publicly available, similar to comments submitted via regulations.gov? If not, why not?

Response: While prioritizing the protection of the anonymity of commenters, USDA will work to share results of the comment period as appropriate.

- b. Other than the reorganization@usda.gov email address, please describe what other methods is USDA using to allow its own employees to submit feedback on the reorganization plan.

Response: USDA agencies are leveraging existing feedback mechanisms for gathering feedback from employees.

- c. Will USDA ensure the Congress has the opportunity to review any comments related to the reorganization plan received via the email address and work together with USDA before USDA makes any additional decisions or announcements regarding the reorganization?

Response: While prioritizing the protection of the anonymity of commenters, USDA will work to share results of the comment period as appropriate.

7. **Food and Nutrition Service (FNS):** USDA has reported that nearly 500 Food and Nutrition Service staff, or 28 percent of the workforce, have left as a result of the deferred resignation program (DRP). In addition, the organization plan includes vacating the current FNS headquarters at Braddock Road and relocating all FNS regional staff.

- a. During the hearing, I asked you to share the number of staff who have left FNS by function, including but not limited to those who have left positions related to financial management, program integrity, or management review of nutrition programs. Please provide this information.

Response: Approximately 500 FNS employees took the Deferred Resignation Program: 7% of the resignations were from the child nutrition program; 11% from supplemental nutrition assistance and safety; 17% supported management and technology; 6% supported retailer operations and compliance; 47% were assigned to the regional operations and support units; and the remaining resignations represented leadership/management and policy units.

- b. Where will staff currently assigned to the FNS Braddock Road facility be assigned when that building is vacated? Please provide the percentage of existing FNS staff who will be assigned to USDA offices in the National Capital Region and those who will be assigned to regional hubs.

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of

Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to relocation will be made and announced after the comment period closes.

8. **Food Aid Programs:** The dismantling of USAID hurt American farmers, created hardship for hungry people around the world, and diminished U.S. influence globally. I am concerned that the reorganization will further undermine food aid programs that remain at USDA, Food for Progress and McGovern-Dole, as well as for the procurement of commodities for the Food for Peace Program.
 - a. Can you elaborate on what the reorganization plan might mean for food aid programs? Does the reorganization assume that the programs will no longer exist, consistent with the President's budget?

Response: USDA programming will not be disrupted by the reorganization.

- b. Does your reorganization plan include a permanent relocation of Food for Peace from USAID to USDA? If so, what assumptions does it make about the permanent staffing, budget, and capacity required for USDA to administer the program?

Response: Secretary's Memorandum 1078-012, *Prioritizing Foreign Assistance from the United States Department of Agriculture, Which Makes The United States of America Safer, Stronger, and More Prosperous*, lays out the Department's priorities. All foreign assistance program investments from the USDA must prioritize (1) making America safer, stronger, and more effective; (2) meeting the core objectives at USDA; and (3) ensuring a return on investment for the American farmers, ranchers, foresters, and agricultural producers who seek to support vulnerable communities around the world with the bounty of American agriculture. Going forward agreements will need to demonstrate how they make America safer, stronger, and more prosperous.

9. **Impact of Reorganization on APHIS and FSIS**

- a. Of APHIS's six operational program units and five management support units, which units and what specific services will be asked to relocate? Provide a detailed breakdown of where specific units and services will be asked to relocate to.

Response: USDA recognizes the criticality of APHIS' mission. In fact, the identification of Raleigh and Fort Collins was in part because these are already APHIS regional hub locations. In regard to APHIS employees in the National Capital Region, USDA announced on August 1, 2025 the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the

Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to relocation will be made and announced after the comment period closes.

- b. Which offices and divisions within FSIS will be asked to relocate? Provide a detailed breakdown of where specific offices and divisions will be asked to relocate to.

Response: USDA recognizes the criticality of FSIS' mission. In regard to FSIS employees in the National Capital Region, USDA announced on August 1, 2025 the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to relocation will be made and announced after the comment period closes.

- c. USDA has reported that around 1,300 Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) staff have departed as a result of the Deferred Resignation Program (DRP). Please provide a detailed breakdown of staff reductions from both normal attrition and DRP in each component of APHIS's six operational program units and five management support units relative to the staffing at the start of the Administration.

Response:

APHIS Units	DRP	Other Separations
ANIMAL AND PLANT HEALTH INSPECTION SERVICE	2	0
ANIMAL CARE	34	15
BIOTECHNOLOGY REGULATORY SERVICES	13	1
EMERGENCY & REGULATORY COMPLIANCE SERVICES	51	9
INTERNATIONAL SERVICES	13	2
LEGISLATIVE AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS STAFF	26	3
MRP BUSINESS SERVICES	273	38
OFFICE OF CIVIL RIGHTS	9	2
PLANT PROTECTION & QUARANTINE	402	279
POLICY & PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT	33	5
VETERINARY SERVICES	362	69
WILDLIFE SERVICES	165	125
Grand Total	1383	548

- d. Please provide specific information on staff who have left positions related to veterinary services, animal disease management work, and the number of vacancies of veterinarian positions within APHIS.

Response: Since January 20, 235 APHIS employees have left their positions related to veterinary services and animal disease management work from the following series: 0701 Veterinary Medical Officers, 0704 Animal Health Technicians, 0403 Microbiologists and Lab Techs (Veterinary Services Program

only.) Of those 235 employees, 176 enrolled in the deferred resignation program. USDA and APHIS specifically continue to hire for veterinarian positions as these positions are excluded under the Secretary's hiring freeze exception memorandum. Currently, APHIS has 96 priority vacancies for Veterinary Medical Officers and 24 priority vacancies for Animal Health Technicians.

10. **Forest Service Regions:** The U.S. Forest Service's Regional Offices are responsible for coordinating implementation policy across individual National Forests, and play a key role in U.S. Forest Service functions ranging from the establishment of timber targets to the selection of Forest Legacy Program awards.

- a. Is the USDA planning to eliminate Regional Foresters positions? If so, does this mean all individual administrative units will communicate directly with the Washington Office, or will there be an equivalent position to Regional Foresters created in the reorganization?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to position elimination and/or reassignments will be made and announced after the comment period closes.

- b. Did the USDA consult with any key forestry stakeholders, including State Foresters, timber companies, sportsmen, and recreation groups, before releasing the reorganization plan?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to position elimination and/or reassignments will be made and announced after the comment period closes.

11. **Forestry Research:** U.S. Forest Service Research & Development carries out world-class forestry research into insect & disease challenges to forest health, wildland fire, innovative uses of wood products, wildlife habitat, and many other management issues on U.S. forestland, both public and private. The President's fiscal year 2026 budget proposed eliminating all USFS R&D funding, and the reorganization plan calls for consolidating the five U.S. Forest Service Research Stations into a single location.

- a. What is the USDA's contingency plan for ongoing experiments or research being conducted at the existing Research Stations given the plan to consolidate these locations?

Response: USDA recognizes the importance of ongoing experiments and research being conducted through the Forest Service's Research and Development Program. There have been no decisions about individual projects made as part of the Secretary's Announcement on August 1, 2025.

- b. Will facilities associated with the five Research Stations also be closed?

Response: The identification of Fort Collins was in part because this is already a USFS research hub location. USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to relocation and facility closure will be made and announced after the comment period closes.

12. **Field-based Agencies:** Rural Development, the Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service are typically considered the field-based agencies due to their county USDA service center delivery mechanism, and they are often are co-located.

- a. How does USDA currently determine how costs are shared among USDA agencies that are co-located?

Response: USDA does not have a standard methodology for determining how costs are shared among USDA agencies that are co-located. Cost factors can vary at each unique office location and are typically allocated based upon a proportional share of space occupied by each agency.

- b. Does USDA plan to use this same process to determine co-location costs during and after the reorganization process?

Response: No. USDA intends to develop a standard methodology for determining how costs are shared among USDA agencies that are co-located.

Senator Joni Ernst

1. Deputy Secretary Vaden, in your testimony, you detailed the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) reorganization plan to relocate a portion of the National Capital Region federal employees to North Carolina, Missouri, Indiana, Colorado, and Utah. Iowa is home to agricultural expertise and affordable living. Nearly 87,000 farmers serve as the foundation for our agricultural economy, which employs 19 percent of residents and accounts for one-third of the state's economic output. Whether it be a local county office or a large research center, USDA's presence in Iowa allows our farmers to partner with you on-the-ground.

In Ames, for example, USDA centers like the National Veterinary Services Laboratory and the National Animal Disease Center work collaboratively to protect livestock and animal health. Most recently, these centers have been critical in responding to Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) and understanding the economic impact of such outbreaks.

In addition to agricultural expertise, Iowa offers an affordable living option for USDA employees. Ames has a federal locality payment of 18.01 percent—comparable to and even lower than most of the cities designated for USDA relocation.

- a. Can you explain how USDA decided on the cities it selected as hub locations? What factors influenced these decisions?
- b. If there's an opportunity, would you commit to taking another look at relocating staff to Iowa, to benefit from reinforcing the state's leadership and significant resources in agriculture?

Response: The Department currently employs approximately 4,600 individuals that work within the National Capital Region (NCR). The hub locations selected ensure USDA is located closer to the people it serves while achieving savings to the American taxpayer. The locations also take into consideration existing concentrations of USDA employees and the cost of living for USDA employees. Further decisions pertaining to relocation will be made and announced after the current comment period closes.

Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith

1. We are constantly hearing from folks about the importance of State Veterinarians at APHIS, who are essential in combatting foreign animal disease outbreaks. These positions, along with an active network of partners who fill service gaps and a robust pipeline of emerging veterinarians, are critical to the health of our livestock across the nation, and as a result, the bottom line for U.S. farmers & ranchers. As you look to this reorganization, how will you ensure that USDA's new structure will address current staff shortages and enhance the recruitment of new veterinarians, so we are prepared to respond to animal disease outbreaks now and in the future? How will the reorganization further impact the surveillance and diagnostic process to ensure we have no gaps in coverage

Response: The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) will maintain its current centers, which are already located within USDA hub cities. The reorganization will have no impact on veterinary services or disease outbreak response.

Senator Charles Grassley

1. Why was Congress not notified or consulted of plans for the reorganization despite so many in Congress supporting these plans?

Response: The Department strongly believes the employees who would be most directly affected should be the first to hear about the Secretary's reorganization memorandum, which was a first step, not the final. Now we have entered a 30-day comment period, having given notice to you of our intentions to reorganize the Department. I welcome feedback and suggestions.

2. Will there be any flexibility for Congress to weigh in on the hubs that have been designated, the movement of positions to certain locations, or the vacating of certain properties such as the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center?

Response: Throughout this process, we welcome feedback from employees, stakeholders, and Congress.

3. Ames, Iowa is home to the Agriculture Research Service's National Animal Disease Center and the National Laboratory for Agriculture and The Environment among others. Will USDA move any positions or projects to Ames, Iowa?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to relocation will be made and announced after the comment period closes.

4. What do you see as Congress's role in this process? Will there be closer consultation with Congress moving forward?

Response: The memorandum issued by the Secretary has built-in flexibility. The memorandum lays out a vision, but then there is a line in that memorandum which says the vision and the plans laid out here can change, and the Secretary delegated authority to me to make those changes, where appropriate.

Senator Michael Bennet

1. I am encouraged by USDA's decision to invest in Fort Collins as a key regional hub. Colorado is uniquely positioned to support the Department's mission in the West, and the success of the hub will depend on ensuring it is fully resourced, strategically staffed, and built to adapt as needs evolve—whether in wildfire response, conservation, or other

priorities. As you know, Fort Collins already hosts USDA employees from agencies such as the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), and Forest Service (USFS). In addition, Denver is home to a Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) regional office, and Lakewood is home to regional offices for the US Forest Service (USFS) and National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS).

- a. What agencies, positions, and functions do you plan to locate at the Fort Collins hub, and how will you leverage existing USDA resources and expertise already in Colorado?

Response: USDA already has multiple agencies in Fort Collins including the Forest Service, APHIS, and Agricultural Research Center. USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Because of this consultation period, the list of what other agencies or specific positions may be relocated to Fort Collins has not been finalized.

- b. Does your current plan involve moving functions from Denver or Lakewood to Fort Collins? Which Colorado offices outside of Fort Collins, if any, will remain in their current locations?

Response: Fort Collins, Denver, and Lakewood are all part of the Denver federal locality area. Initially, USDA does not expect to move functions from Denver or Lakewood to Fort Collins but will explore the Denver federal locality area facility strategy over time.

- c. Will any current USDA employees in Colorado lose their jobs or be required to relocate to other states as a result of this reorganization?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025 the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. At this time no decision has been made on the number of employees who will be required to relocate.

- d. Are you working with USDA agency personnel to ensure that the reorganization will increase efficiency in their workflow and that there will be no loss of services provided to Colorado as a result of the move?

Response: Increasing efficiencies, improving service, and reducing costs to the taxpayers were driving factors in this reorganization plan.

- e. Are stakeholders in Colorado being provided with timely, substantive briefings to inform their participation in the 30-day comment period? If so, can you provide a list of Colorado stakeholders with whom you have engaged?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. USDA will continue to engage with stakeholders, including Colorado stakeholders, as decisions are made subsequent to the comment period.

- 2. In Principle 3 of the USDA reorganization framework, the Department proposes eliminating ARS Area Offices and managing "residual functions" through the Office of National Programs. What specific "residual functions" will be retained, and how will they be managed under this new structure?

Response: Area Offices perform administrative, stakeholder engagement, and laboratory and research coordination functions. Administrative functions will be consolidated to eliminate redundancies. ARS intends to retain stakeholder engagement and laboratory and research coordination functions with these functions overseen by the Office of National Programs. Existing Area Office staff performing these functions will continue to be located where they are today, except for Beltsville staff housed at BARC.

- 3. The Forest Service's regional offices provide specialized expertise to forests across the country, enable coordination among forests, help maintain external relationships, and provide budget oversight. Regional offices also play an integral role in implementing the agency's statutory obligations under the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and other legislation.

- a. How will USDA ensure that these critical functions are not lost through the reorganization?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to the agency's structure and the location of specialized personnel will be made after that date.

- b. Some specialized personnel—such as experts in ski area management, real estate, or litigation—are only located at the regional level. How will the Forest Service manage this transition and ensure that critical expertise that is difficult to replace is not permanently lost.

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to the agency's structure and the location of specialized personnel will be made after that date.

- c. How will USDA ensure that the elimination of regional offices does not compromise the Forest Service's ability to fulfill its statutory and regulatory duties?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025.

- d. Will the USFS have a new structure for regional oversight, or will all 155 forests report directly to the Chief? If my office has a question that applies broadly to Colorado forests, where should I direct my question?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. While no final decisions have been made, USDA does not expect that all 155 forests will report directly to the Chief.

The U.S. Forest Service Office of Legislative Affairs can manage questions that you or your staff have that apply broadly to Colorado forests.

- 4. Forest Service Regional offices play key roles in coordinating wildfire response and also support crucial on-the-ground work for mitigation and restoration.

- a. How will USDA retain and transition critical fire services at the agency?

Response: USDA understands the importance of the wildland fire program. USDA's announcement on August 1, 2025, recognized the ongoing fire season and no changes are currently anticipated in the wildland fire program. Any restructuring will be done at a future date and designed to improve the performance and effectiveness of the program with the health and wellbeing of our firefighters in mind.

- b. Will any fire personnel, resources, or functions be lost or disrupted as part of the move?

Response: The reorganization will be done in a way that does not interfere with the U.S. Forest Service during peak fire activity in the West. They are going to remain focused on their mission of safe and effective fire response and any movements will take place when the agency has decided it is safe to do so.

5. If Forest Service regional offices are eliminated, every existing grant, cooperative agreement, MOU, MOA, or contract signed by a regional forester will need to be renegotiated, as the federal signatory would no longer exist. This would affect states, Tribes, counties, NGOs, universities, and others with legal agreements in place.
 - a. What entity or office within the Forest Service will assume responsibility for renegotiating these agreements? How will USDA divide those responsibilities geographically?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. The renegotiation of agreements will be conducted on a case-by-case basis, as needed with our Office of General Counsel.

- b. Please provide an estimate of how many positions at Forest Service regional offices and research stations would be affected by the proposed reorganization. Has USDA or the Forest Service conducted any analysis of how these changes might affect institutional capacity or expertise? If not, why?

Response: USDA will share analyses where appropriate.

- c. What engagement has occurred with rural municipal or county governments that may be affected by these changes?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025.

6. Several authorities in current law rely on the structure and roles of regional offices and research stations—for example, the appointment of Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) members. How does the Department plan to maintain continuity in fulfilling these statutory responsibilities if these offices are restructured or eliminated?

Response: USDA does not anticipate any interruptions in fulfilling our statutory responsibilities as a part of the reorganization.

7. Forest Service research stations play a critical role in supporting rural communities and private forest landowners, particularly on issues like wildfire risk, forest health, and invasive species. How will USDA ensure that any consolidation of research functions continues to support these stakeholders, especially given rapid changes in forest ownership and management needs?

Response: The identification of Fort Collins was in part because this is already USFS research hub location. USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to the research stations closures will be made and announced after the comment period closes.

8. The long-standing decentralized structure of the Forest Service has supported strong relationships with local partners and has been foundational to efforts on wildfire mitigation, suppression, and recovery; recreation; and landscape-scale restoration.
 - a. How will USDA ensure that external relationships are preserved or strengthened through the reorganization process?
 - b. Which external stakeholders were consulted during the development of the reorganization framework?
 - c. Were groups such as state emergency service offices, state foresters, timber purchasers, sportsmen, or recreation advocates included?
 - d. Are you proactively engaging with them now to ensure they are appropriately briefed on the development of the plan to provide relevant feedback?
 - e. Who will USDA consult with during the formulation of agency-specific "consolidation step-down plans"?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025.

Senator Cory Booker

1. Forest Service researchers conduct regionally-specific research in different forest ecosystems, which deal with distinct pests, forest fire pressures, surrounding industries, and weather challenges. Do you plan to relocate employees or sell land or buildings from

any of the experimental forests, ranges, or watersheds? Please provide a list of all experimental units where you plan to reduce functions.

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions about our research facilities will be made after the comment period is closed.

2. The Little Silas Experimental Forest in New Jersey conducts important research on prescribed burns and wildfire management.
 - a. Can you confirm that USDA will not relocate the researchers who work from the Silas Little Experimental Forest?

Response: USDA has not made any decisions regarding relocating individual researchers.

- b. Can you confirm that USDA will not remove the buildings at Silas Little Experimental Forest, which are used to store equipment and host researchers seasonally?

Response: Decisions about our research facilities will be made after the 30-day comment period is closed.

- c. Can you confirm that USDA will not shut down, scale down, or otherwise slow the research taking place at Silas Little Experimental Forest?

Response: Decisions about our research facilities will be made after the 30-day comment period is closed.

3. Do you plan to relocate employees from any of the Forestry Sciences Laboratories or Institutes?

Response: USDA has not made any decisions regarding relocating individual researchers.

4. Please explain how moving Forest Service employees from Regional Offices will bring the USDA closer to the people it serves. How do you justify increasing the distance between Forest Service employees and the regions they serve, in New Jersey and the northeast more broadly?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the

Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025.

5. Do you plan to relocate employees from any of the Forest Service Urban Field Stations? If yes, how do you justify moving people further from their mission areas?

Response: USDA has not made any decisions regarding relocating individual researchers.

6. As of today, USDA has still not informed all stakeholders of some of the specific changes being planned by USDA, such as which Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) offices are slated for closure, and whether Forest Service experimental units will be eliminated.
 - a. How do you justify not sharing this information with all relevant stakeholders, when the comment period has already started?
 - b. When will you share the details with all stakeholders?
 - c. Can you commit to making sure ALL stakeholders have at least thirty days to weigh in, after seeing specific plans of exactly which office units are proposed for relocations/closure/or other changes, BEFORE final decisions are made?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to relocation and retention will be made and announced after the comment period closes.

7. Which FNS regional offices will you eliminate or reduce, and where will these functions be transferred to?

Response: The Food and Nutrition Service will reduce its number of regions from seven to four and align locations with the USDA Hubs and Service Centers over a two-year period. USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to relocation will be made and announced after the comment period closes.

8. Please explain how closing FNS regional offices will meet your stated goal of getting more USDA employees closer to the people that USDA serves.

Response: The current FNS organizational structure and geographic distribution including several USDA resources in Alexandria, VA have not

reduced SNAP error rates or increased application timeliness. USDA intends to move more resources to provide technical assistance to its state administered programs. This includes moving resources from the National Capital Region and consolidating management layers and other support functions.

9. Why is USDA no longer planning to relocate employees based in the Texas Food and Nutrition Service office?

Response: Based on initial feedback, USDA will retain its Dallas, Texas Regional Office.

10. The current reorganization plan relocates employees into Regional Hubs in states that are predominantly represented by Republicans.

- a. Can you confirm that the Regional Offices and other units that are being shut down or relocated are not disproportionately in Democratically represented states?
- b. What will you do to make sure that the reorganization is a non-partisan process and that feedback from stakeholders in Democratically-represented states is fairly incorporated?

Response: Hub locations were selected based upon cost of living, current resource distribution, and the most geographically logical areas to best serve our farmers, ranchers, and producers. Although these decisions were not based upon political landscapes, two of the five hub locations are in states with Democratic Governors. USDA will also maintain two additional core administrative support locations: Albuquerque, New Mexico and Minneapolis, Minnesota.

11. Which National Agricultural Statistics Service offices will you eliminate or reduce, and where will these functions be transferred to?

Response: The National Agricultural Statistics Service will consolidate its 12 existing regions into five USDA Hubs over a multi-year period. The NASS National Operations Center in St. Louis, Missouri will be retained.

12. How many USDA employees work in New Jersey? How many, and from which units, are slated for relocation?

Response: A total of 568 employees work in New Jersey. No decisions on employee relocations have been made at this time.

13. Which National Resources Conservation Service units or employees will be relocated?

Response: The Natural Resources Conservation Service will align its regional structure with the five USDA hub locations.

14. Will you formally survey USDA employees on if they are willing to relocate, before finalizing plans for reorganization? If yes, will you make this information available to Congress?

Response: We are actively communicating with USDA employees, and all affected employees will have the option to relocate. In addition, there is a public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025.

Response: While prioritizing the protection of the anonymity of commenters, USDA will work to share results of the comment period as appropriate.

15. Is USDA open to changing the USDA Regional Hub Locations based on feedback that you receive?

Response: The five proposed hub locations were carefully selected. The lower cost of living in all proposed hub locations offer individuals the ability to enter into a career, start a family, and stay with the USDA long-term. However, USDA is open to changing the Regional Hub locations based on feedback it receives.

16. The USDA must serve areas regardless of their cost-of-living. There are many areas in the Northeast that have relatively low cost-of-living. Further, there are many talented people who want to live and work in the Northeast region, whose expertise we would miss out on by only allowing them to work in other areas. The USDA should not double down on only serving areas of the country where it already is. How do you justify no USDA Regional Hub Location being in the Northeast?

Response: The National Capitol Region falls within the Northeast region. Every agency and mission area under the Secretary's plan will have representation and officials in Washington, D.C., allowing USDA to serve the Northeast region and the entire country.

17. As part of this reorganization, USDA is proposing to shut down USDA mission area civil rights offices and consolidate all civil rights functions into the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights. We know that historically and still today a lot of the USDA discrimination happens at the local level including at the county committee level. To the extent there is any civil rights oversight that is currently happening at the local level, it is happening through mission area offices like the FPAC Civil Rights Division which you now plan to close. What is USDA's plan for addressing ongoing discrimination at the local level including in county committees?

Response: Consolidating civil rights functions will ensure everyone served by the USDA receives the same excellent level of service, regardless of which agency within the Department is serving them.

18. Given the significant staffing changes over the past 6 months and before the reorganization starts, I want to better understand the current status of field offices and field office employees. Please provide the following information by state and county and by agency (excluding part-time employees like the FSA county committee members) and if employees are associated with the state office, please denote the split between the local service center and state office and between farm loan programs and farm programs “county office” employees:

- a. Number of employees on the payroll at the start of the Administration in January 2025;

Response: 110,928 (total # on 1/25/25) // 102,568 adjusted (i.e., minus County)

- b. Number of employees that have taken the deferred resignation program and are no longer working even if they are on the payroll through the end of the fiscal year;

Response: DRP 1: 3,928 // DRP 2: 11,609

- c. Number of employees that have otherwise separated from federal service through retirement or other attrition since January 2025;

Response: As of 7/29/25: 1,789 retirements // 3,995 other departures

- d. Number of positions that have been advertised for external candidates since January 2025 for these field and state offices, excluding advertisements for positions that are only open to current federal employees;

Response: As of 7/29/25: 5,106 new hires

- e. Number of positions that have been filled by external candidates since January 2025.

Response: As of 7/29/25: 4,825 external hires. 309 of these hires were FSA county employees, 1,360 were permanent employees (public safety and national security such as firefighters and law enforcement), 160 were Term employees, and the remainder were temporary/seasonal employees.

19. Over the past 7 months, USDA has lost over 15,000 employees just through the deferred resignation program alone. There were reports that USDA employees were scared of losing their jobs and thought that they had to take DRP during the process. It turns out that too many employees took DRP and are now getting paid not to work for the rest of

the fiscal year, and USDA is now asking employees in some agencies like NRCS and Forest Service to transfer internally to fill critical roles. And NRCS is reportedly approving fewer EQIP applications due to a diminished workforce. Now, through this reorganization effort, the Trump Administration plans to uproot an additional 2,000+ DC-based employees and move them across the country. Many of them will likely not stay with the Department - the previous reorganization of NIFA and ERS under the first Trump Administration saw nearly 75% of staff decline the move. Those two agencies saw lower productivity, increased disengagement among remaining staff, and considerably less experience among those who were hired to replace those that left.

- a. How is USDA going to fix the existing delays to customers with a reorganization plan that Secretary Rollins has stated on Fox News is actually intended to further deplete USDA staff?
- b. How will you ensure the known disruptions to continuous service and loss of institutional knowledge that would result from this planned move by the Trump Administration do not impact the quality of service provided to America's farmers and ranchers? How will you ensure that USDA remains agile in its ability to respond to uncertain market conditions and evolving threats to American agriculture as it undergoes this massive transformation of its Departmental structure?
- c. Has USDA conducted any evaluation of the potential impact this reorganization effort will have on the quality and timeliness of services to producers? If so, what were the findings of those analyses?

Response: Over the last four years, USDA's workforce grew by approximately 8% and employees' salaries increased by 14.5%. Many of these salaries were funded by temporary funding. We must make certain USDA can afford its workforce. And where appropriate, the Secretary maintains the ability to hire critically necessary positions.

20. Secretary Rollins spoke to Fox News on July 25th and said that one of the goals of this reorganization is to deter people from public service. She said, "President Trump's vision was always to move people out of these government jobs, where maybe it isn't the most productive use, into the private sector." This is an echo of the initial "fork in the road" email sent to government employees, encouraging them to resign, characterizing government service jobs as "lower productivity jobs," and contrasting them with those in private sector, which it called "higher productivity jobs." This message undermines the honor of public service. Do you think the USDA employees who work for you are doing "lower productivity jobs"?

Response: Over the last four years, USDA's workforce grew by approximately 8% and employees' salaries increased by 14.5%. Many of these salaries were funded by temporary funding. We must make certain USDA can afford its workforce.

21. One of the stated principles of this reorganization is centralization and getting government services closer to the Americans through these hub cities. But many of USDA's programs, particularly those involving public lands and rural communities, rely on decentralized, place-based decision-making.
- How will USDA ensure that this shift toward centralization does not come at the expense of local responsiveness?
 - What's the plan to preserve institutional knowledge, long-standing community relationships, and field-level expertise when so much is being pulled away from the regions and into centralized hubs?

Response: There are no farms or forests in Washington, D.C. Moving employees closer to the stakeholders it serves does not compromise institutional knowledge, and it is unfair to minimize the depth of knowledge of the 92% of USDA employees in areas other than the National Capital Region.

Senator Ben Ray Lujan

1. **Efficiency and Service Delivery:** Please provide specific examples of how this restructuring will measurably improve USDA's efficiency, service delivery, or interagency coordination with respect to the administration of domestic nutrition programs. Please provide relevant accompanying materials and analysis in support of these examples and conclusions.

Response: USDA will share analyses where appropriate and at the appropriate time.

2. **FNS Regional Offices:** This plan proposes to consolidate the regional offices for the Food and Nutrition Service from seven to five and relocate all of them. Collectively, these regional offices serve all states and Tribes administering FNS programs, providing critical technical assistance and oversight.
- Can you explain exactly how states and Tribes will be served under the five new regional offices?
 - Were the seven FNS regions assessed and adjusted during President Trump's first term and, if so, what additional factors and considerations led you to conclude that additional adjustment was necessary?
 - Have final decisions been made regarding locations for planned FNS regions and what were the key considerations in selecting these regions?

- d. Has the Department conducted an analysis of how this proposed reorganization will impact the ability of Americans to access federal nutrition assistance programs?
- e. Does USDA have a plan in place to retain experienced staff at the Food and Nutrition Service who support states in getting food out to those impacted by disaster?

Response: The current FNS organizational structure and geographic distribution including several USDA resources in Alexandria, VA have not reduced SNAP error rates or increased application timeliness. USDA intends to move more resources to provide technical assistance to its state administered programs. This includes moving resources from the National Capital Region and consolidating management layers and other support functions.

- 3. **FNS Retail Operations:** Has USDA analyzed how consolidating regional offices for the Food and Nutrition Service from seven to five will affect inspections of applicant and currently-authorized SNAP retailers? If so, please share that analysis with Congress. How will USDA ensure that retailer applications are processed in a timely manner given that there will be fewer FNS offices located near stores?

Response: The current FNS organizational structure and geographic distribution including several USDA resources in Alexandria, VA have not reduced SNAP error rates or increased application timeliness. USDA intends to move more resources to provide technical assistance to its state administered programs. This includes moving resources from the National Capital Region and consolidating management layers and other support functions.

- 4. **Forest Service:** Most observers would say that the Forest Service is already under capacity relative to the amount of work that Congress has authorized and directed it to do. Now the agency has new responsibilities under the reconciliation bill and is implicated, at least partially, in a variety of President Trump's Executive orders. This reorganization is going to further hamstring an agency that has already lost over 15,000 people under your leadership. How is the Forest Service going to deliver on the statutory responsibilities that this committee has given it when we continue to lose the leadership and institutional knowledge at the agency?

- a. As you know, the Forest Service's Southwest Regional Office is located in Albuquerque, New Mexico.
- b. What will eliminating the Forest Service's Southwest Regional Office in Albuquerque, New Mexico mean for the employees there?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the

Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. USDA will communicate any impacts to Southwest Regional Office employees upon conclusion of the comment period.

Senator Raphael Warnock

1. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) announcement, the pillars of this reorganization plan are to ensure the size of USDA's workforce aligns with available financial resources and agricultural priorities; bring USDA closer to its customers; eliminate management layers and bureaucracy; and consolidate redundant support functions.¹
 - a. What steps will USDA take to ensure that farmer-facing services, like those of the Farm Service Agency and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, are not disrupted by this reorganization plan?
 - b. What steps will you take to ensure that the normal processes of USDA are not delayed or interrupted?

Response: Most USDA employees are at the field-level and will continue to be in the County Offices where they serve farmers, foresters, ranchers, and producers.

2. On August 1, 2025, the USDA opened a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders to provide feedback on the USDA's reorganization plan.²
 - a. How will USDA take any submitted public comments into account when implementing or changing the reorganization plan?
 - b. How many rounds of public comment periods will the USDA conduct?
 - c. Prior to this announcement, did USDA engage in any proactive outreach to solicit feedback from stakeholders? If so, which stakeholders?
 - d. What additional outreach does USDA plan to do to ensure *all* communities that would be affected by this reorganization plan are aware of this public comment period and have the opportunity to provide feedback on this plan?
 - e. Will you commit to meeting with the Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture to receive and seriously consider his feedback on this plan?

¹ <https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/news/press-releases/2025/07/24/secretary-rollins-announces-usda-reorganization-restoring-departments-core-mission-supporting>

² <https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/news/press-releases/2025/08/01/usda-opens-public-comment-period-department-reorganization-plan>

- f. Will you commit to meeting with the Georgia Farm Bureau to receive and seriously consider its feedback on this plan?
- g. Will you commit to meeting with the Georgia State Forester to receive and seriously consider his feedback on this plan?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025.

- 3. During the hearing, when asked if USDA consulted with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), you responded that "a plan was submitted to the Office of Management and Budget."³ Are there any differences between the plan submitted to OMB and the plan USDA released publicly on July 24, 2025? If yes, please provide this Committee with a copy of the plan USDA submitted to the Office of Management and Budget.

Response: A draft framework was submitted to OMB, and it did change as we continued to iterate the plan. The Secretary Memorandum reflects USDA's actual reorganization intentions.

- 4. During the hearing, you stated that USDA would be happy to work with members to provide background data on the decisions that were made within the reorganization plan. Will you commit to sharing all background data and analyses that USDA collected and conducted for this reorganization plan with this Committee? If yes, please provide this Committee with copies of all background data and analyses.

Response: USDA will share analyses where appropriate and at the appropriate time.

- 5. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act includes a provision that provides farmers with an opportunity to voluntarily increase their allocations of base acres.⁴ How will you work to ensure that USDA's reorganization plan and the consolidation of offices do not interfere with the agency's ability to efficiently and equitably carry out this application and base acre allocation process?

Response: Maintaining continuity of its programs is of paramount importance to USDA and USDA will reassess if program operations or USDA service are impacted.

³ <https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/hearings/review-of-the-usda-reorganization-proposal>

⁴ One Big Beautiful Bill Act, Pub. L. No. 119-21.

6. The Secretary's Memorandum: SM 1078-015 states that under this reorganization plan, the Department will consolidate "civil rights functions into the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Civil Rights."⁵
- When creating this plan, did USDA comply with Departmental Regulation 1010⁶ to consult with internal civil rights staff?
 - If not, does USDA intend to comply with the requirements of Departmental Regulation 1010, including the requirement for consultation of civil rights staff? If not, why not?
 - Has USDA considered how the consolidation of civil rights functions within the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Civil Rights would affect the complaint process and timelines?

Response: USDA will comply with all laws and regulations necessary through this process. The consolidation of Civil Rights functions at the Department level will provide employees and the public uniform processes and standards across the entire department.

7. The Secretary's Memorandum: SM 1078-015 states that under this reorganization plan, the Department will reduce the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business at USDA "to a single position that focuses on the statutory requirements."⁷ This office was created to provide maximum opportunities for small businesses to participate in USDA's contracting portfolio.⁸ Given USDA's significant contracting needs, what steps will USDA take to ensure the office's statutory mandate is met with just one person?

Response: USDA is a strong supporter of contracting to small businesses and consistently meets and routinely exceeds its small business goals. However, the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization's (OSDBU) impact on achieving these goals is minimal since it does not employ any contracting officers or contracting staff and is primarily focused on reporting and attending limited outreach events. USDA recognizes that achievement of its small business goals rests within its procurement functions and this consolidation bolsters accountability for delivering small business goals.

8. The Secretary's Memorandum: SM 1078-015 states USDA would be realigning the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE) student programs to the Agricultural Research Service.⁹ As you know, OPPE is a statutorily required office.

⁵ <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/sm-1078-015.pdf>

⁶ https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/DR_1010-001_Organization_Planning_Review_and_Approval.pdf

⁷ <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/sm-1078-015.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/general-information/staff-offices/departamental-administration/office-small-and-disadvantaged-business-utilization-osdbu>

⁹ <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/sm-1078-015.pdf>

Please explain what functions and programs OPPE would be responsible for after the realignment under the reorganization plan.

Response: The Student Programs that will be aligned to ARS (e.g., 1890 Scholars, 1890 liaisons and Hispanic Serving Institution liaisons, and E. Kika De La Garza Fellowship Program) are not statutorily required to be housed within OPPE. ARS already administers USDA-wide student programs (Wallace Carver and HACU internship program) and realigning the OPPE programs to ARS allows the programs to be more effectively administered. OPPE will continue to maintain its statutory responsibilities for military/veteran liaison functions, New and Beginning Farmers, and Farm Labor.

9. The Secretary's Memorandum: SM 1078-015 also states that the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) "will reduce its number of regions from seven to five."¹⁰
 - a. How will USDA ensure continuity of critical nutrition programs that serve over 40 million Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients during this transition, including the many thousands of families and children in Georgia that rely on this aid?

Response: SNAP is a federally funded, state-administered program, and will continue without disruption.

- b. Has USDA conducted an analysis of how losing FNS employees will affect SNAP error rate monitoring and technical assistance to states, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program oversight and implementation, child nutrition program administration, and emergency food assistance during disasters? If so, please provide that analysis for each program in your response. If not, please explain why you did not do so before announcing this plan.

Response: The current FNS organizational structure and geographic distribution including several USDA resources in Alexandria, VA have not reduced SNAP error rates or increased application timeliness. USDA intends to move more resources to provide technical assistance to its state administered programs. This includes moving resources from the National Capital Region and consolidating management layers and other support functions.

- c. FNS regularly works with Congress and other federal agencies on policy development and crisis response. How will this collaboration be maintained when FNS leadership and expertise are dispersed across the country rather than where these partnerships can be most effectively managed?

¹⁰ *Id.*

Response: FNS will continue to have the appropriate personnel that directly provide policy development and crisis response support located in the Washington, D.C. area.

10. The Secretary's Memorandum: SM 1078-015 also states that USDA will maintain the Forest Service's eastern service center in Athens, Georgia, while phasing out the nine Regional Offices, including the Forest Service's Southern Region headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, over the next year.¹¹

- a. How many employees from the Southern Region headquarters will be moved to Athens?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions about individual relocations have not been made yet.

- b. Will Southern Region headquarters employees in Atlanta have lateral reassignment opportunities to the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests within the state?

Response: Lateral reassignment opportunities are always available to U.S. Forest Service employees.

- c. Will they prioritize reassigning Southern Region headquarters employees to other National Forests within the Southern Region's current footprint?

Response: Employees are currently eligible for voluntary reassignments and choose where and which positions they are interested in – USDA has not issued any mandatory reassignments.

- d. What will be the primary responsibility of the employees in the Athens, Georgia office?

Response: The Service Center in Athens, GA will support the U.S. Forest Service's southern operations.

- e. Will the Forest Service maintain the Forestry Sciences Laboratory in Athens?

Response: Yes. Athens was chosen in part because it was already a hub for USFS operations and research and development.

¹¹ <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/sm-1078-015.pdf>

11. Regional Foresters to develop 5-year strategies for increasing their timber volume offered over the next 4-5 years; establish, within 24 months, 2 years' worth of "shelf stock" of timber volume coming from project decisions; and integrate their regional 10-year reforestation implementation strategies with the national active forest management strategy.¹² With the reorganization eliminating the Forest Service Regional Offices, who will now be responsible for implementing the above strategies?

Response: As with all land management decisions, local line officers (e.g., Forest Supervisors) will retain decision-making authority and be responsible their respective timber projects and accomplishments.

12. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) uses an iterative process for establishing timber targets wherein the USFS Washington Office (WO) works with each of the USFS Regions to set targets for the total amount of timber the agency aims to sell.¹³ In this process, USFS WO asks the regions for the amount of timber they aim to sell each year for the next five 5 years and how funding they would need to plan and implement timber sales. The USFS then eventually sets agencywide and regional timber targets for the upcoming year. Given the USDA reorganization plan eliminates USFS Regional Offices, how will the USFS establish timber targets and allocate resources for meeting the timber targets?

Response: USFS will continue to use its timber management staff to establish timber targets and allocation resources.

13. During your testimony, you stated that this relocation is an "exciting opportunity" for current employees. However, you also acknowledged that expecting all employees to relocate would be "unrealistic."¹⁴ According to reporting, Secretary Rollins also said that potentially half of the National Capital Region-based staff may not relocate.¹⁵
- a. Has USDA conducted any analysis of the hardship this reorganization will impose on employee families, including disruption to children's education and spouse employment, loss of family and community support networks, and impact on employees nearing retirement who may be forced to choose between career and family stability? If so, please provide that analysis in your response. If not, please explain why you did not do so before announcing this plan.

Response: Despite the number of USDA employees growing by approximately 8% in the last four years, the number of employees in the National Capital Region has decreased by over 13% in the same period. The cost of living in the Washington, D.C. metro is already the biggest hurdle to retaining talented staff.

¹² <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/implementation-secretarial-memo-1078-006.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-25-107496.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/hearings/review-of-the-usda-reorganization-proposal>

¹⁵ <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2025/07/rollins-says-potentially-half-of-usdas-washington-staff-may-not-relocate-for-reorganization-00477035>

Future leaders of USDA can afford the cost of living in the regional hubs. We want people to come to USDA for a career, to start a family, and to stay with us.

- b. What specific contingency plans are in place if fewer than 50% of affected USDA staff accept relocation?

Response: Despite the number of USDA employees growing by approximately 8% in the last four years, the number of employees in the National Capital Region has decreased by over 13% in the same period. The cost of living in the Washington, D.C. metro is already the biggest hurdle to retaining talented staff. Future leaders of USDA can afford the cost of living in the regional hubs. We want people to come to USDA for a career, to start a family, and to stay with us.

- c. How will USDA replace the institutional knowledge and specialized experience of the remaining senior USDA staff who choose not to relocate?

Response: Despite the number of USDA employees growing by approximately 8% in the last four years, the number of employees in the National Capital Region has decreased by over 13% in the same period. The cost of living in the Washington, D.C. metro is already the biggest hurdle to retaining talented staff. Future leaders of USDA can afford the cost of living in the regional hubs. We want people to come to USDA for a career, to start a family, and to stay with us.

- d. What is the estimated timeline and cost for training replacement staff to achieve equivalent competency levels?

Response: Decisions regarding relocations are not yet final and estimated timeline and cost is speculative. However, based on the decline in the number of employees in the National Capital Region over the last four years, it can be assumed that new staff can be trained in a reasonable period of time.

- e. What safeguards are in place to reverse the implementation of any provisions of this plan if they prove detrimental to program operations and USDA service?

Response: Maintaining continuity of its programs is of paramount importance to USDA and USDA will reassess if program operations or USDA service is impacted.

14. Following the relocation of the Economic Research Service and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), GAO released a report that included several recommendations to USDA, many of which USDA has yet to address as of March 2025.¹⁶ The report also found that the relocation resulted in each agency losing over half of their employees and that the proportion of Black employees at NIFA significantly declined.¹⁷

¹⁶ <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-104709>

¹⁷ <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-104709.pdf>

- a. Why has the USDA not updated the GAO on its progress?

Response: The Biden administration chose to contemplate implementation of GAO's recommendations, choosing to take no action.

- b. Does it intend to make these recommendations before moving forward with the relocation plan? If not, why?

Response: The Biden administration chose to contemplate implementation of GAO's recommendations, choosing to take no action.

- c. Has USDA performed any civil rights impact analysis of the reorganization with respect to employment and USDA programs, as required under section 12403(a) of the 2018 Farm Bill?¹⁸ If so, please provide a copy of that analysis.

Response: USDA will share analyses where appropriate and at the appropriate time.

- d. What steps will USDA take to ensure that any approved RIFs will not disproportionately affect underserved and/or minority employees?

Response: USDA intends to leverage all its voluntary workforce reshaping tools and does not intend to conduct any large-scale RIFs. If any small and focused RIFs are required, USDA will undertake an analysis to understand the impact to all USDA employees.

- e. What steps will USDA take to ensure that underserved and/or minority employees are not disproportionately impacted by this relocation plan?

Response: USDA intends to leverage all its voluntary workforce reshaping tools.

15. During the hearing, you stated that "there can be no RIFs unless it is personally approved by [you]."¹⁹ What factors or analyses will you use to determine whether to approve a Reduction in Force (RIF)?

Response: USDA intends to leverage all its voluntary workforce reshaping tools to mitigate any potential RIFs. RIFs will only be approved after all other tools are leveraged, and at my discretion.

¹⁸ <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ334/PLAW-115publ334.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/hearings/review-of-the-usda-reorganization-proposal>

Senator Peter Welch

1. Many of USDA's programs, particularly those involving public lands and rural communities, rely on decentralized, place-based decision-making.
 - a. How will USDA ensure that this reorganization plan does not come at the expense of local responsiveness?

Response: The reorganization plan retains all current field capacity.

- b. What's the plan to preserve institutional knowledge, long-standing community relationships, and field-level expertise when so much is being pulled away from the regions and into centralized hubs?

Response: The reorganization plan retains all current field capacity.

- c. How are you working to engage with Northeast stakeholders on the impacts of this reorganization plan in their ability to interact with USDA programs and personnel?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025.

- d. What is the total number of USDA offices outside of the National Capital Region that will be closed?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to relocation will be made and announced after the comment period closes.

- e. How many USDA employees outside of the National Capital Region will be relocated?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to relocation will be made and announced after the comment period closes.

2. This reorganization plan concerns me because USDA still hasn't released funding for many USDA programs. More specifically, Vermont is still waiting for USDA to allocate \$31 million through the Rural Development Disaster Assistance Fund (DAF). If there is a loss of 30-50% of National Capital Region staff as projected by Secretary Rollins, how does USDA plan to roll out funding for programs that impact small-scale farmers and rural communities?

Response: The reorganization plan retains all current field capacity, and USDA Rural Development will continue to utilize field offices across the nation to roll out programs that assist rural communities.

Senator John Fetterman

1. Recently, Ranking Member Klobuchar and other senators sent a letter to you and Secretary Rollins regarding the USDA's proposed reorganization plan. This letter included detailed oversight questions for how the USDA decided to reorganize and its plans to execute on this proposal. These questions fall squarely within the oversight responsibilities of this committee and were meant to ensure the USDA is utilizing a process of reasoned decision-making as it undertakes this proposed reorganization. As leaders directly elected by our constituents, we need USDA to be responsive to us as we serve farmers and rural communities in our states—especially as this proposed reorganization was announced with little to no input from our constituents. While the USDA may be responsible for implementing law—including the law cited in the secretary's July 24 memo—these laws are written in this Committee. As such, it is the expectation of the Committee that the USDA participate in inquiries relating to our work to ensure that the laws we, and our predecessors, have worked to enact are faithfully executed and comply with intent. Your response to the Ranking Member's letter was, to say the least, inadequate. As such, I expect detailed responses to each of the following questions about governance and process:
 - a. Will you commit yourself and your staff to providing more substantive, thoughtful responses to members of this committee and our staff about this relocation proposal, which would reshape the way USDA operates—including but not limited to the detailed responses we expect through these questions for the record?

Response: Over the last four years, while the number of USDA employees grew by 8%, the number of National Capital Region employees decreased by over 13%. No reorganization notification was provided to Congress. Issuance of the reorganization memorandum and providing an opportunity for anyone to provide comments is an effort to provide transparency.

- b. How will you and your staff work with members of this committee and our staff to provide advance information about decisions you make around this proposed reorganization?

Response: Over the last four years, while the number of USDA employees grew by 8%, the number of National Capital Region employees decreased by over 13%. No reorganization notification was provided to Congress. Issuance of the reorganization memorandum and providing an opportunity for anyone to provide comments is an effort to provide transparency.

- c. Departmental Regulation 1010—issued in 2018—describes the policy and actions for making changes to organizational structures within USDA and requires that a statement acknowledging that all applicable labor relations organizations representing affected employees have been notified of the proposal, and certifying that the proposing officials have met or will meet all applicable labor relations obligations. Does USDA have such a statement, in accordance with DR 1010? If not, why not?

Response: USDA will meet all statutorily required labor management obligations.

- d. On August 1, 2025, USDA announced a public comment period for its proposed reorganization. The actions and information shared by USDA up to this point have been inadequate to provide the public and Congress the information we need to comment on the proposal substantively. How will you ensure openness and transparency through this process, when you are circumventing operating through the Federal Register notice and comment process?

Response: Over the last four years, while the number of USDA employees grew by 8%, the number of National Capital Region employees decreased by over 13%. No reorganization notification was provided to Congress. Issuance of the reorganization memorandum and providing an opportunity for anyone to provide comments is an effort to provide transparency.

- e. It is well understood that providing an opportunity for notice and comment comes with the expectation that the agency will carefully consider all comments and analyses received. To ensure transparency in this process, is USDA prepared to publicly post the comments gathered to enhance the public's understanding of the concerns of their fellow citizens and is the USDA prepared to consider and respond to comments as it would during an APA rulemaking?

Response: While prioritizing the protection of the anonymity of commenters, USDA will work to share results of the comment period as appropriate.

- f. Secretary Rollins stated on August 3 that USDA's plans to move much of its National Capital Region (NCR)-based staff to 5 hubs are "about 95 percent"

finalized. What parts of the plan are not finalized yet? Why did USDA finalize over 90 percent of the plan prior to talking to Congress, stakeholders, and its own employees?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to relocation will be made and announced after the comment period closes.

2. During the hearing, you testified that 91 out of 94 ARS labs will be untouched. There are 38 USDA-ARS positions at the Pasture Lab in University Park, PA. Please provide the locations of the 3 ARS labs that you propose to be affected. Will any of the positions in University Park, PA, be relocated to any of the new hubs, under your proposed reorganization plan?

Response: The only ARS lab impacted by the reorganization memorandum is in Beltsville, Maryland. The positions at the Pasture Lab will not be impacted.

3. Thank you for your stated commitment during the hearing to engaging with unions through this proposed process. I have several follow-ups, as union members are not fully reassured at this time.
 - a. What is your specific plan and timeline for engaging unions through this proposed process? I understand that there may be different requirements under different collective bargaining agreements, so please provide a plan and timeline for engagement for each union that has a collective bargaining agreement with USDA.

Response: USDA will follow all its statutory labor management obligations.

- b. Will you disclose all relocation timelines, relocation expense offerings, salary adjustments, and other pertinent details to union representatives with as much advance notice as practicable, and always before acting on such proposals? Please respond either yes or no.

Response: Yes

- c. What level of consultation has USDA had with employee unions up to this point, as required under federal labor law, and how has their input been incorporated into this reorganization plan?

Response: USDA will follow all its statutory labor management obligations.

4. The National Organic Program (NOP), currently housed in the USDA South Building and established as directed by Congress through the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990, develops and enforces consistent standards for organically produced agricultural products sold in the U.S., ensuring that producers who invest in this value-added process are on a level playing field and consumers who purchase certified organic products are assured of the quality of the product. Organic standards are a priority to my state, which ranks highly in number of certified organic farms. They are something I've raised many times in this committee.
 - a. With the closing of the South Building, will NOP be relocated under your proposed reorganization?
 - b. If yes, to which hub or hubs will NOP be relocated?
 - c. Will USDA's proposed reorganization also entail a structural reassignment of the program?
 - d. How would this reassignment look if so?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to relocation will be made and announced after the comment period closes.

Senator Adam Schiff

1. What concrete actions will USDA take to prevent a repeat of the 2019 mass loss of senior researchers due to relocation of the Economic Research Service (ERS) and National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA)?

Response: Over the last four years, while the number of USDA employees has grown by 8%, the number of employees living within the National Capital Region has declined by over 13%. With the number of remote positions that USDA offered, employees could live anywhere, and they chose not to live within the National Capital Region.

USDA has implemented lessons learned from the ERS and NIFA relocation including the identification of multiple hub locations as opposed to a single location and focusing on locations where employees already work and reside that have a lower cost of living.

2. Given ongoing threats to national food security due to severe weather, supply chain disruptions, and invasive pests, what is the justification for USDA downsizing and/or relocating critical research programs at a time when expanded scientific capacity is needed most?

Response: On January 4, 2025, President Biden signed into law the USE IT Act. The USE IT Act requires all buildings leased or owned by a government agency to be at least 60 percent occupied. Not even one of USDA's buildings in the National Capital Region meets this congressionally-mandated 60 percent occupancy rate. The legislation states that if the 60 percent threshold is not reached, the agency should consolidate and vacate to get into a footprint that does meet the 60 percent threshold. USDA is following the law. This will take place over a period of years, and in a way that does not interfere with any ongoing research.

3. Federal and state agencies share mandates under laws (e.g., Plant Protection Act) in regard to pest surveillance, quarantine, eradication, and rapid response. The relocation of USDA's headquarters staff and key research centers away from the National Capital Region raises the following questions:
 - a. How will resources' physical and institutional distance from DC disrupt existing pest detection, surveillance, outreach, and crisis management functions?
 - b. How will funding flows, federal-state communication, data sharing, and technical expertise—currently tailored to California's particular pest risks—be maintained or improved through this plan?
 - c. How will the distancing of USDA personnel potentially hamper instant interagency consultation, joint training exercises, data exchange, and regulatory harmonization, all critical for outbreak containment and eradication efforts?
 - d. What concrete steps has USDA undertaken to study these questions and consult outside experts prior to the announced reorganization?

Response: Currently, 90% of USDA's staff report to work outside the National Capital Region. We have proposed adding approximately 2.5 percent to that number. The work of these 90% is just as vital to the mission of USDA as is the work of staff in the National Capital Region. In fact, the heart of USDA is in the field, and the maximum number of people possible should report to work there.

USDA has a total of 4,754 facilities at which its employees report to work every day. The Secretary's proposal calls for closing exactly four of those locations.

Every Agency and every Mission Area will continue to have representation and officials in Washington, D.C.

4. The reorganization plan states the Forest Service's nine regional offices will be phased out over the next year with consideration of the current fire season. Regional Foresters currently work between the DC office and 154 Forest Service administrative units to oversee the implementation of Forest Service policy. This comprises responsibilities ranging from wildfire response, including approving or denying requests to mobilize emergency firefighters, to providing direction, training, and assistance to individual forests for the administration of trails on Forest System lands. How will the Forest Service's DC office coordinate its policies across more than 150 different administrative units with the elimination of the Forest Service regions? Has USDA analyzed how the elimination of the nine Forest Service regions may impact Forest Service wildfire preparedness and response?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. USDA also recognizes the importance of wildfire preparedness and response. Any restructuring to the fire program will be done at a future date and designed to improve the performance and effectiveness of the program with the health and wellbeing of our firefighters in mind.

5. On April 3, 2025, Secretary's Memorandum 1078-006, entitled, "*Increasing Timber Production and Designating an Emergency Situation on National Forest System Lands*," designated more than 112 million acres of Forest Service lands as under an emergency situation. Authorized emergency actions on these lands include emergency consultation to comply with the Endangered Species Act (ESA), National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and Clean Water Act (CWA) as well as allowing for expedited Tribal consultation in certain scenarios. Forest Service Regional Offices play a key role in communicating these policy changes down to individual forests. As acknowledged above, the Administration is proposing to eliminate Regional Offices as the Forest Service is being tasked with implementing a significant shift in policies. How would the planned elimination of Regional Offices affect the implementation of such policies?

Response: USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and trusted state and local partners, to provide feedback on the Department's reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary's memorandum issued on July 24, 2025.

- a. To establish a baseline of how many emergency consultations are conducted under the current regional structure, please provide the number of forest projects within Forest Service Regions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 10 that have utilized expedited Tribal consultation since April 3, 2025.

Response: No projects have used expedited Tribal Consultation.

- b. To establish a baseline of how many emergency consultations are conducted under the current regional structure, please provide the number of forest projects within Forest Service Regions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 10 located within the Forest Health and Fuels Emergency Situation Determination lands that have used the following since April 3, 2025:
 - i. Emergency consultation to comply with the ESA,
 - ii. Emergency and programmatic consultation to comply with the NHPA; or
 - iii. Emergency procedures to comply with the CWA

Response: To date, 32 projects have used emergency consultations across the entire National Forest System.

- 6. One important role of the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is feeding people in disaster situations, during which FNS staff deploy to support emergency feeding and deploy the Disaster SNAP Program (D-SNAP). In some years, D-SNAP supports millions of people affected by natural disasters, such as in 2017, when over 3 million people devastated by a series of hurricanes relied on D-SNAP. D-SNAP also supports victims of tornadoes, wildfires, mud slides, winter storms, flooding, and other natural disasters. Disaster relief requires expertise and highly intensive staff efforts to deploy to and support emergency situations. How will FNS deal with significant loss of staff and expertise, particularly when FEMA is also facing disruption?

Response: Maintaining continuity of its programs is of paramount importance to USDA and sees not potential for disruption to its programming and progress.

- 7. With the loss of institutional knowledge of many career staff who are unlikely to relocate, what is USDA's plan to maintain progress across the following areas?
 - a. Progress that has been made in recent years regarding communication between USDA and the VA to address food insecurity amongst veterans
 - b. Interagency partnerships to reduce food loss and waste
 - c. Interagency partnerships to address nutrition security and improve diet-related health outcomes

Response: Maintaining continuity of its programs is of paramount importance to USDA and sees not potential for disruption to its programming and progress.

- 8. In the hearing, you were supportive of Risk Management Agency (RMA) employees working remotely and noted that many are "remote for a reason not because it became cool five years ago but because their job requires them to be on the road. And this

Reorganization Plan does not affect that.” That claim is contradicted by the fact that the main farmer-facing employees of the Federal Crop Insurance program are private crop insurance agents (and not federal employees), and that RMA employees are not required to be co-located with crop insurance companies or agents (as are, for example, commodity graders in their work). Conversely, you were critical of the previous Administration in allowing ERS and NIFA employees to be hired remotely, asserting that “employees that were hired reported to no office other than their own kitchen.”

- a. Can you explain this inconsistency between agencies and explain when USDA believes remote work is acceptable versus should be terminated?

Response: In January, President Trump issued an executive order requiring federal employees to return to in-person work, effectively ending remote work arrangements for many. This order, titled "Return to In-Person Work," directed agencies to transition back to traditional office environments, with some exceptions for specific roles or situations. USDA intends to fully comply with this order.

- b. Calling upon your testimony that FNS employees are overseeing the actual employees delivering nutrition programs (the states, in the case of FNS), RMA employees oversee program delivery but are not on the front lines themselves. Under the logic you used for RMA remote employment, is USDA considering allowing FNS employees to be remote instead of forcing them to move to one of the hubs when regional offices are closed?

Response: The Food and Nutrition Service will reduce its number of regions from seven to four and align locations with the USDA Hubs and Service Centers over a two-year period. USDA announced on August 1, 2025, the opening of a 30-day public comment period for stakeholders, including USDA employees, members of Congress, and agricultural and nutrition partners, to provide feedback on the Department’s reorganization plan, as outlined in the Secretary’s memorandum issued on July 24, 2025. Decisions pertaining to relocation will be made and announced after the comment period closes.