

United States Senate

February 25, 2025

The Honorable Brooke Rollins
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Rollins:

Congratulations on your recent confirmation as Secretary of Agriculture. I am writing to you today in regards to alarming reports about the Trump Administration's termination of several key U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) employees last week.¹ While the USDA has stated that it's actively working to reverse these firings, this news is extremely concerning given the impacts it could pose to ongoing federal response efforts for recent outbreaks of the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), or bird flu, at agricultural operations in my home state of Nevada and across the country. Accordingly, I respectfully request that you respond in writing within two weeks to provide transparency and assurances to myself, Nevadans, and the American public that these reckless terminations have been resolved, and that they have not hindered federal response efforts or state assistance and coordination efforts.

As you are aware, USDA plays a critical role in maintaining a safe, affordable food system for American families. Yet, reports on the firing of employees at USDA's National Animal Health Laboratory Network (NAHLN), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Agricultural Research Service (ARS), and Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) could severely impact or delay efforts to detect, track, research, and respond to the spread of bird flu variants. Due to these concerns, I request the following information to fully assess the impacts of these terminations on HPAI response and coordination efforts:

- Your strategic vision to combat current and future HPAI outbreaks.
- The specific positions of terminated employees, including their roles and responsibilities as it relates to your strategic vision and coordination with federal, state, and municipal officials.
- The total number of USDA employees who have been terminated by the Trump Administration, including any positions in Nevada, and a status update on those who have successfully been rehired.
- Analysis on how these terminations, rehires, and the ongoing hiring freeze or buy-out offers from the Trump Administration have impacted bird flu response efforts,

¹ Smith, Allan, Melanie Zanona, and Laura Strickler. "USDA says it accidentally fired officials working on bird flu and is now trying to rehire them." NBC News. Last modified February 19, 2025. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/doge/usda-accidentally-fired-officials-bird-flu-rehire-rcna192716>.

coordination with impacted states and municipalities, and Administration efforts to fill vacant positions – including those in Nevada.

- A detailed assessment of ongoing efforts to fill open positions, as well as the impacts that these firings and rehiring will have on future recruitment efforts at USDA.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. Again, I look forward to your prompt response to these questions by no later than March 11, 2025. Per my outstanding meeting request, I'd still appreciate the opportunity to meet with you and further discuss agricultural issues facing Nevada. It remains imperative that this Administration coordinates with Congress to leverage all available resources and analysis to assist and protect American farmers, ranchers, and families.

Sincerely,



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator