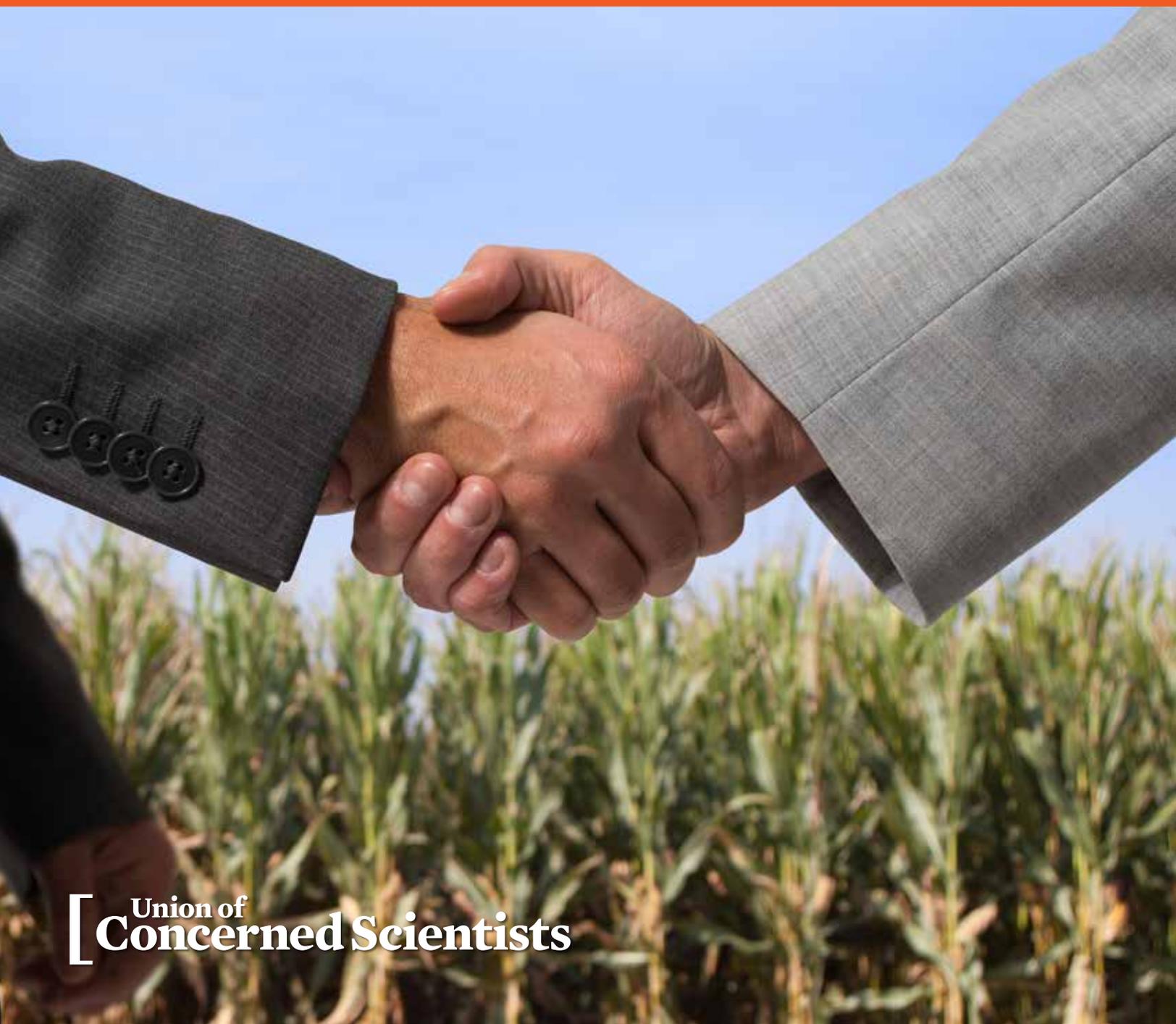


# Betrayal at the USDA

*How the Trump Administration Is Sidelining Science  
and Favoring Industry over Farmers and the Public*



[ Union of  
Concerned Scientists

From farm to fork, our nation's food system should be one we are proud of, one that ensures the success of farmers while protecting our soil and water and helping to make safe and healthy food available to everyone. Science-based public policies are critical to such a system. Smart policies can invest taxpayer dollars in agricultural research and technical assistance to help farmers increase profits, reduce soil erosion and water pollution, avert crop failures, and boost the resilience of their land to floods and droughts. Science-based public policies also can keep our food supply safe, improve nutrition, and improve working conditions for those who produce and process our food.

Ultimately, policies and programs that are based on scientific evidence and that prioritize the well-being of consumers, farmers, and workers make our communities and our country stronger. Yet science is too often sidelined from important public decisionmaking by people with something to gain. This has been particularly true during the first year or so of the Trump administration, which has sidelined science to reward industry—with policy decisions that favor their interests—on many issues.

In this report, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) examines the farm and food policy record of the Trump administration; its secretary of agriculture, Sonny Perdue; and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) during its first year under his leadership. During the 2016 campaign and since, the president has spoken frequently about his commitment to the needs of farmers, rural communities, and blue-collar workers, calling them “the forgotten men and women.” Farmers and rural dwellers particularly voted for him in large numbers, and many believed he would pursue policies in their interest (Balz 2017). However, our examination of his USDA reveals a betrayal of these supporters and other ordinary Americans. First the president chose an agriculture secretary whose prior history in public office favored corporate interests over the public interest. And during Secretary Perdue's first year on the job, the USDA has taken many steps to sideline science, undermine key public health and safety protections, and prioritize the bottom lines of large agricultural companies over the needs of the majority of consumers, farmers, and rural economies.

## **The USDA's Decisions Affect Us All**

Unknown to most Americans, the decisions of the vast USDA—with its 29 agencies and offices and nearly 100,000 employees, including thousands of scientists, economists, and statisticians—touch all of our lives every day. USDA policies and programs affect farmers' decisions about

***Policies and programs that are based on scientific evidence and that prioritize the well-being of consumers, farmers, and workers make our communities and our country stronger.***

what they grow and how they grow it; the infrastructure and services available in rural communities; the quality of the nation's soil and water resources; and the healthfulness, price, and selection of food offered to consumers everywhere. The USDA makes significant investments in science—some \$3 billion annually for agricultural and food research carried out within the USDA and through grants to universities and other institutions—and it has a stated commitment to using the best available science in its decisionmaking.

The Trump administration's attacks on science and disregard for the public interest at numerous federal departments and agencies have garnered widespread media attention. As the Center for Science and Democracy at UCS has documented in detail (Carter et al. 2017), the administration has substituted political interests—ideology and the wishes of big industries—for scientific ones time and time again. The administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), for example, has taken steps to roll back safeguards designed to protect the public from hazardous air pollutants, pesticides, and other dangers, and political appointees at multiple federal agencies have made scientific data less accessible, halted or failed to produce studies, interfered with expert advisory committees, and silenced and intimidated federal scientists (UCS n.d.).

Like all federal agencies, the USDA must maintain high standards of scientific integrity and a commitment to evidence-based decisionmaking in the public interest. Consumers are looking to the department to continue recent progress toward a healthier, safer, more sustainable food system. Farmers and rural communities, too, are looking to the USDA for solutions to the mounting challenges they face. With farm incomes plummeting, rural economies stagnating, and climate change threatening farm productivity, they need new public investments and strategies from the USDA to protect their livelihoods and critical natural resources for the future.

During the Trump administration, Congress is scheduled to write a new five-year farm bill—the trillion-dollar



*The decisions and policies made at the USDA trickle down to affect us all. For consumers, that means what foods are available, how nutritious they are, and how much they cost.*

legislation that governs nearly everything the USDA works on, from the federal crop insurance program and a myriad of other programs that serve farmers, to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which helps millions of individuals and families put food on the table every month. Secretary Perdue's USDA will need to work with Congress to pass the farm bill and to reauthorize federal child nutrition programs, which provide free or reduced-cost meals to more than 30.4 million schoolchildren daily in the National School Lunch Program alone (USDA n.d. a). The USDA will also need to partner with the Department of Health and Human Services to update science-based federal dietary guidelines, which are increasingly critical for population health: half of US adults are living with one or more diet-related chronic diseases, and the medical costs associated with obesity now account for an estimated 21 percent of national

***Consumers are looking to the USDA to continue recent progress toward a healthier, safer, more sustainable food system.***

health care expenditures (HHS and USDA 2015; Cawley and Meyerhoefer 2012).

These are all daunting tasks, and they will be even more difficult if the USDA's political leadership is not committed to science-based decisionmaking in the public interest.

### **As Georgia Governor, Sonny Perdue Favored Corporate Interests Over Science and the Public Interest**

George Ervin "Sonny" Perdue III (no relation to the Perdue Farms family) trained as a veterinarian before entering politics. In 2002, after more than a decade in the Georgia State Senate, he was elected the state's first Republican governor since Reconstruction. At the end of two terms, Perdue returned to the private sector in 2011, running several agriculture-related companies.

Perdue's time as Georgia governor is instructive in understanding his approach to public executive decisionmaking. Our examination of his tenure reveals three troubling tendencies: a willingness to profit from his office; a reliance on business associates, campaign contributors, and corporate leaders for staffing government positions; and a propensity to go easy on regulated industries, even when science suggested a need for stronger public protections.

## ETHICS VIOLATIONS AND SELF-DEALING

Governor Perdue pledged in 2003 to “restore public trust in state government,” signing an executive order prohibiting officials and staff in the governor’s office from accepting gifts of a value exceeding \$25 (State of Georgia 2003). But despite his stated commitment to government ethics, he repeatedly flouted his own rules.

The governor accepted many high-value gifts from lobbyists—including airline and sporting event tickets—totaling at least \$25,000 (Lipton and Eder 2017; Salzer 2005a). He continued to run several businesses that created conflicts of interest, refusing to divest these and other assets or to place them in a blind trust—the latter being an arrangement some elected officials (including other state governors) have chosen to avoid the appearance that a personal profit motive might influence decisions made while they serve in an official capacity. In perhaps his biggest ethics scandal, Governor Perdue signed into law a tax provision—proposed by a member of the Georgia House of Representatives who also worked part-time as Perdue’s personal attorney—that gave the governor a retroactive \$100,000 tax break on a prior land deal (Salzer 2006).

By the time he left office, the State Ethics Commission had received 13 complaints against Perdue and twice had found him in violation of ethics rules (Lipton and Eder 2017). In one case, he became Georgia’s first governor to be fined by the commission for campaign violations (Salzer 2005b).

## USE OF THE REVOLVING DOOR TO REWARD CRONIES

Governor Perdue made ample use of the “revolving door,” whereby former government employees are hired by companies and special interest groups as lobbyists, consultants, and strategists, while corporate lobbyists move into government jobs. Critics of this informal system contend that it affords a vehicle for government officials to use their positions for personal or private gain at the taxpayer’s expense, creates a pro-business bias in policy formulation, and erodes public trust in government, leading to a decline in civic participation (Wallheimer 2017; RDWG 2005). A recent analysis found that Perdue appointed more than a dozen business associates and campaign donors to state government positions, and on other occasions, he funneled his state staff into jobs at his companies (Kullgren 2017b).

## BUDGET CUTS AND LAX REGULATION LED TO ILLNESS AND DEATH

During his run for the governorship, candidate Perdue campaigned in part on a platform of “eliminating undue interference by government bureaucracies” (State of Georgia n.d.).

This hands-off approach to regulating the state’s industries placed the public’s health and safety at risk.

For example, in 2006 the governor requested a budget that cut funding for the state’s food safety division by nearly one-third (Erbenraut 2017), leaving it ill prepared to react to food-borne illnesses. Less than a year later, an outbreak of salmonella, traced back to peanut butter from a plant in Georgia, sickened at least 625 people across the country (Young 2007) and eventually resulted in record federal criminal penalties of \$11.2 million against the plant’s parent company, Conagra (Bynum 2016). Only after a second major salmonella outbreak in 2008 (traced to peanut paste from another Georgia facility) killed nine people, sickened 700 more, and sent a company executive to prison, did Governor Perdue sign food safety legislation empowering state regulators to set higher standards. Though he also requested a slightly higher food safety budget, that budget was still below the amount of the budget when he took office (Erbenraut 2017). Years later, the pattern was still much in evidence: during a 2016 episode involving peanut residue in Georgia wheat that sickened at least two children, emails from Perdue (then a private citizen and grain shipping businessman) showed that he lobbied the state agriculture commissioner to downplay the incident, apparently fearing it would damage his business (Perez 2017).

Governor Perdue’s ethics problems and coziness with monied interests led the nonpartisan group Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington in 2010 to name him one of the worst governors in America (CREW 2010).



USDA

*George Ervin “Sonny” Perdue III was appointed Secretary of Agriculture by President Donald Trump in 2017. As governor of Georgia from 2003–2011, he established a pattern of ethics violations, exploiting the office for personal gain and prioritizing political and corporate interests over those of his constituents. The nonpartisan group Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington named him one of the worst governors in America in 2010.*



*In 2006, Governor Perdue slashed Georgia's food safety budget by nearly one-third, leaving the state ill prepared to react to food-borne illnesses. The next two years saw two major salmonella outbreaks traced back to peanut products made in Georgia facilities. Despite the impact of these outbreaks, which sickened more than 1,000 people and killed nine, Perdue's action to improve food safety regulation was slow and inadequate. At the federal level, the USDA shares authority for ensuring food safety.*

## Secretary Perdue's USDA Has Sidelined Science and Betrayed Farmers and the Public

Given the incoming Trump administration's enthusiasm for agribusiness (Box 1, pp. 6–7), Perdue was an unsurprising choice to lead the USDA. He has deep experience with the industry, having started or otherwise been linked to more than a dozen agribusiness companies and limited liability corporations and having served on the board of the Georgia Agribusiness Council (O'Neil 2017). His industry-friendly record as Georgia's governor made him attractive to the largest groups that lobby the USDA, and other views—such as his history of climate denial (Box 3, p. 12)—further endeared him to these groups. Perdue's nomination looked like a gift to industry (UCS 2017), and industry cheered it (AFBF 2017; NCBA 2017; NGFA 2017).

At the end of his first year, our assessment of Secretary Perdue's decisions and actions at the USDA confirms our initial concerns. He has made troubling staff appointments, backed unqualified candidates for senior positions, undermined science-based health and safety protections, and prioritized the wishes of agribusiness over the needs of farmers and consumers.

### PERDUE'S PERSONNEL CHOICES DEMONSTRATE A DISREGARD FOR EXPERTISE AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

As he did in Georgia, Secretary Perdue has surrounded himself to a great extent with agribusiness boosters, making liberal use of the revolving door to stock his office and many leadership posts throughout the USDA with former business associates and agribusiness industry leaders. Perdue has also supported the appointment of individuals who are clearly unqualified for

their jobs—sometimes spectacularly so. In the process, he is skewing policymaking toward the interests of the agribusiness industry at the expense of the average farmer and consumer, and making government less effective for the public it serves.

**Industry-conflicted USDA officials tilt decisionmaking toward agribusiness.** While many leadership positions at the USDA remain unfilled (Box 2, p. 8), those officials who are on staff have come overwhelmingly from agribusiness. For example, the secretary's chief of staff, Heidi Green, was formerly a partner of Perdue's shipping business (Kullgren 2017b). Deputy Secretary Stephen Censky came to his position directly from a 21-year tenure as chief executive officer of the American Soybean Association, which represents an industry worth tens of billions of dollars annually (ASA 2017; ERS n.d.). And Perdue's undersecretary of agriculture for trade and foreign agricultural affairs, Ted McKinney, spent most of his career inside some of the world's largest multinational agribusiness companies, moving among the related Dow AgroSciences, DowElanco, and Elanco over nearly 25 years (ISDA 2013; Office of the Lt. Governor, State House 2013). Collectively, their appointments fail to represent the diversity of US agriculture, and thus they risk reinforcing the department's commitment to a food and farming system dominated by agribusiness rather than bringing on expertise that would better support healthier and more sustainable alternatives.

Another USDA appointee with deep industry ties has already been accused of misusing her connections and position. Rebeckah Adcock, a senior advisor in the secretary's office, previously worked as a lobbyist for a variety of agribusiness groups: the Kentucky Farm Bureau; its parent organization, the American Farm Bureau Federation; and, most recently, the pesticide industry association CropLife America (Wyant and Chase 2017). An analysis of USDA visitor logs showed that Adcock, in May 2017, met with her former CropLife colleagues, despite having signed an ethics agreement prohibiting such contacts. Reportedly, she discussed pesticide impacts on water quality, an issue she had previously lobbied on and was prohibited from working on at the USDA (Ivory and Faturechi 2017).

Still other industry-conflicted USDA appointees have received waivers from the White House to sidestep ethics rules (Kotch 2018a). A particularly egregious example is Kailee Tkacz, a former lobbyist for the Corn Refiners Association, which represents the interests of the nation's largest corn syrup manufacturers. Secretary Perdue announced in July 2017 that Tkacz would join the USDA as a policy advisor (USDA 2017a), and in August, White House counsel Donald McGahn issued a waiver to allow her to advise Perdue and other USDA officials

*continued on page 8*

BOX 1.

## The USDA: People’s Department or Department of Agribusiness?

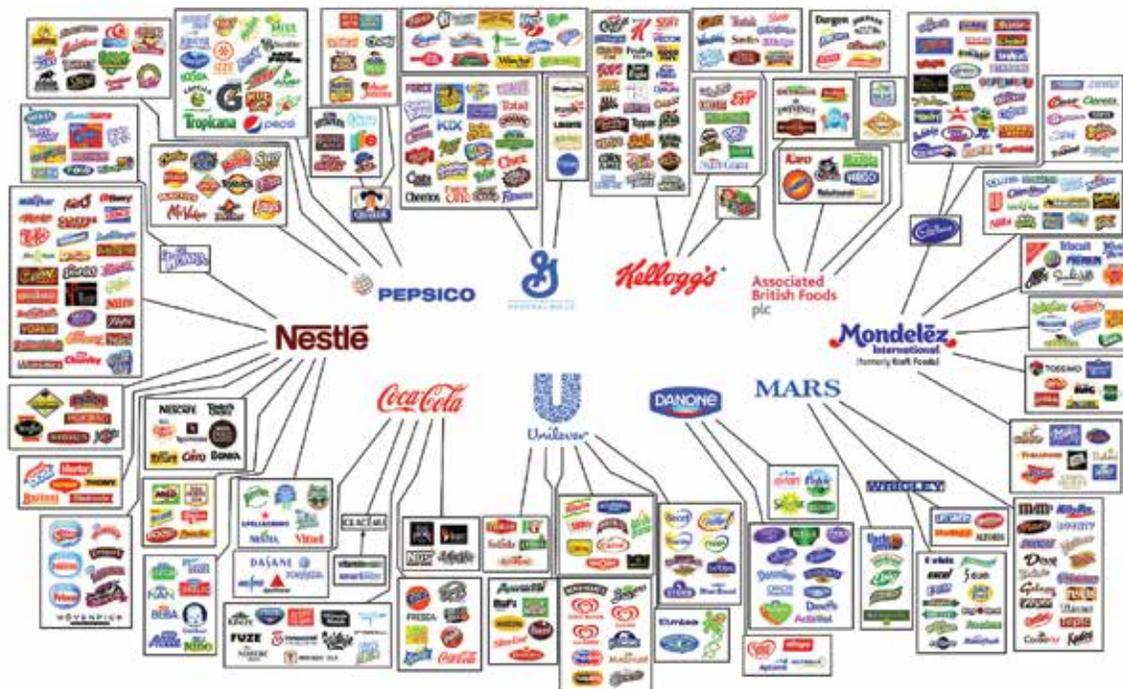
The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) was established in 1862 by an act of Congress signed by President Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln later referred to the USDA as “the people’s department,” an apt name because, at the time, about half of his countrymen and -women lived on farms (Vilsack 2012). Fast-forward to the 1970s, when considerably fewer Americans were farming: President Richard Nixon’s secretary of agriculture, Earl Butz—who was criticized for his ties to big business—urged farmers to produce as much as possible at all costs, to either “get big or get out” of farming (Philpott 2008).

Since that time, agriculture and food production have become ever more industrialized and are controlled by a shrinking number of large corporations—“agribusiness.” In this report, we use that term to refer to the collection of vast corporate entities that control agriculture and food production, driving

the trend toward large-scale, specialized, capital-intensive, mechanized farms and swallowing up the commodities those farms produce as raw materials for processed foods. Among the results of this system are decreasing prosperity for farmers and rural communities, low wages for workers, extensive environmental damage, and an epidemic of diet-related diseases (UCS 2016).

The agribusiness sector has entrenched this system by dedicating large lobbying budgets and cultivating access to policymakers to ensure that US farm policy serves its interests above all. In 2013—the year leading up to passage of the most recent federal farm bill governing USDA programs and activities—368 entities sent lobbyists to Congress to influence the legislation, among them, seed and pesticide conglomerates Monsanto and Syngenta; agribusiness trade groups such as the

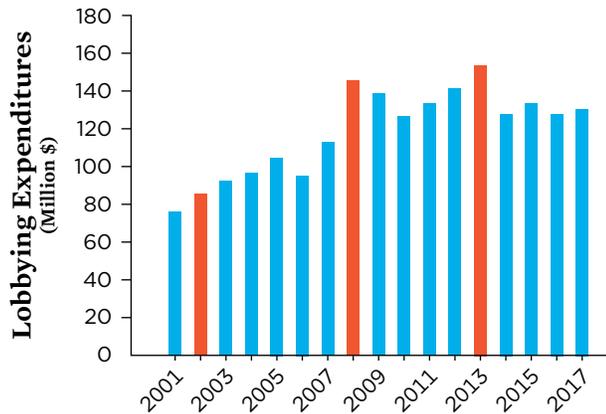
FIGURE 1. Our Food System is Controlled by Big Business



*Today, very few Americans are engaged in growing food, and our food and farming system is driven by agribusiness corporations. On the consumer end, the plethora of food brands masks the fact that much of our food comes from only a handful of global companies.*

SOURCE: OXFAM 2014.

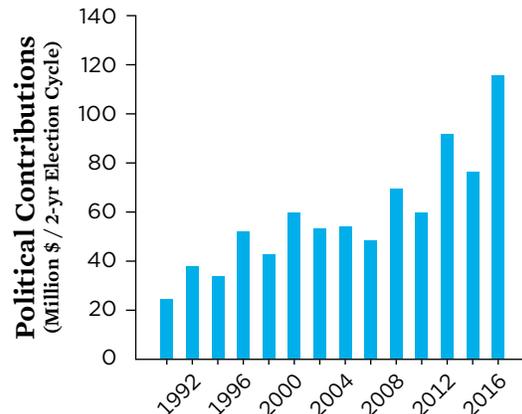
FIGURE 2. Agribusiness Lobbying Expenditures, 2001–2017



The corporations that control agriculture and our food supply devote large budgets to lobbying Congress for industry-friendly legislation. Total agribusiness lobbying expenditures generally spike leading up to Congressional reauthorization of the farm bill—on this graph, in the years 2002, 2008, and 2013.

SOURCE: CENTER FOR RESPONSIVE POLITICS N.D. A.

FIGURE 3. Agribusiness Political Contributions (by Two-Year Election Cycle), 1990–2016



Another way agribusiness corporations maintain the status quo is through political contributions to Congress. This graph illustrates the steady rise in agribusiness contributions over the last two decades, from \$24 million during the 1990 election cycle to nearly \$116 million in the 2016 cycle.

SOURCE: CENTER FOR RESPONSIVE POLITICS N.D. B.

American Sugar Alliance and the Snack Food Association; and processed- and fast-food companies such as Kraft Foods, McDonald’s, and PepsiCo (CRP n.d. c). Monsanto alone spent more than \$7 million lobbying Congress that year (CRP n.d. d), while the pesticide industry group CropLife America spent more than \$3.2 million (CRP n.d. e). Now as then, the industry also directs millions of dollars in political contributions to curry favor with incumbent and would-be elected officials. In the 2016 election cycle alone, agribusiness contributions to congressional candidates totaled \$116 million (CRP n.d. f).

All this pressure has resulted in public policies that are favorable to agribusiness and do little to curb corporate consolidation of the food system. Still, the USDA under the Obama administration took steps to make the system healthier and more sustainable, and to direct more of its benefits to the

average farmer and consumer. Between 2009 and 2016, for example, the department improved federal dietary recommendations, strengthened food safety rules and standards for school meals, invested in local farmers and regional food projects, and boosted research and technical support to help farmers deal with a changing climate (N. Johnson 2017; Mazurek 2017; Oswald 2016; Stillerman 2016).

Though it was limited, even this progress is at risk of being reversed. In 2016, candidate Trump—according to leaked talking points created for his campaign’s agricultural advisory committee—prioritized “a shift back to conventional agriculture . . . fighting the so-called good food movement and undoing Obama-era agricultural and environmental policies” (Kullgren 2016). That advisory committee counted Sonny Perdue as a member (OABA 2016).

***In recent years, agribusiness has used lobbying and political contributions to ensure that US farm policy serves its interests above all.***

BOX 2.

## Vacant USDA Positions Neglect Science and the Needs of Farmers

For much of the presidential transition, US Department of Agriculture (USDA) staff waited for Trump transition officials to take the reins and provide direction. Staff had prepared reams of briefing materials and readied office space that remained unused for weeks. Well over a month after the election, only one transition volunteer was regularly coming to work at USDA headquarters (Lewis 2017; Boudreau 2016). Just two days before his swearing-in, after a months' long selection process in which the names of a dozen candidates were floated (Kullgren, Evich, and Stokols 2017), then-President-elect Trump finally chose Sonny Perdue as his nominee for secretary of agriculture (Davis and Haberman 2017). It was the last cabinet post to be named, and farmers had already begun to feel their concerns were being ignored (Bjerga 2017; *Greenwire* 2017). Then, Perdue's Senate confirmation was held up for months, apparently by wrangling over the ethical implications of his agribusiness conflicts of interest (Kullgren 2017a).

Nominations to other leadership positions at the USDA have come slowly or not at all. At press time—more than 14 months into the Trump administration—only five of the 13 USDA leadership positions subject to Senate confirmation had been confirmed, with an additional three nominees pending confirmation. There were still no nominees for key positions, including undersecretary for research, education, and economics; undersecretary for food safety; undersecretary for food, nutrition, and consumer services; and undersecretary for natural resources and environment (*Washington Post* 2018). Qualified nominees are needed for these jobs, which guide and advocate within the USDA for scientific initiatives and programs that affect farmers, the US food supply, and the natural resources both depend upon. Without such leadership, these important functions of the USDA are at risk.

on the department's update of federal dietary guidelines. Although Tkacz—who also previously lobbied for the Snack Food Association (now known as SNAC International)—has no training in science, public health, or nutrition, McGahn's waiver contended “it is in the public interest” that she be allowed to work on these issues at the USDA (Kotch 2018b).

**Unqualified USDA candidates fail to serve the public interest.** The public deserves to have policymakers with expertise making decisions on its behalf. But the administration has disregarded expertise, hiring dozens of midlevel USDA political appointees, instead, from the ranks of Trump campaign staff and volunteers. In many cases, these appointees—whose resumes show previous work experience as, for example, a truck driver and a country club cabana attendant—came to the USDA with little to no agriculture or federal policy experience and, in some cases, without the level of education required for their salary grades (Hopkinson 2017a).

By far the most egregious personnel decision of Secretary Perdue's tenure thus far was his strong backing of Sam Clovis, President Trump's nominee to head the USDA's research, education, and economics (REE) mission area. Clovis was a national co-chair of the 2016 Trump campaign who later became the Trump transition team's primary representative at the USDA (*Agri-Pulse* 2017a). The president's nomination

of Clovis for the REE undersecretary post was announced in July 2017 (Evich 2017a).

The REE undersecretary, whose job also encompasses the role of USDA chief scientist, is responsible for directing the implementation of the department's scientific integrity policy and overseeing its four major research arms: the Agricultural Research Service, the Economic Research Service, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and the National Agricultural Statistics Service. These agencies make multibillion-dollar annual investments in research and education that are essential to consumers, farmers, and rural communities. In 2008, Congress mandated that the person who fills this position “shall be appointed . . . from among distinguished scientists with specialized training or significant experience in agricultural research, education, and economics” (US Congress 2008). Clovis had no such training or experience (Eilperin 2017), and to make matters worse, a media investigation of his past public statements, radio broadcasts, and writings showed him espousing racist and homophobic views and embracing conspiracy theories not based on evidence (Kaczynski 2017a; Kaczynski 2017b; Kaczynski, Massie, and LeBlanc 2017).

Despite a steady drip of evidence that Clovis was uniquely unqualified and ill suited for the job, Secretary Perdue was vocal in his support (Abbott 2017; *Farm Journal*



Secretary Perdue strongly backed President Trump’s failed nominee for USDA chief scientist, Sam Clovis. A former talk radio host and co-chair of the 2016 Trump campaign, Clovis lacked the legally required scientific training and had a history of racist and homophobic remarks. The nomination was ultimately withdrawn, but Secretary Perdue has kept Clovis on the USDA payroll as a senior advisor.

2017). Even after Clovis withdrew his nomination after revelations that he was involved in Trump campaign contacts with Russia (Eilperin and Rucker 2017), Perdue has kept him at the department. Since January 20, 2017, Clovis has been on the USDA payroll as a senior White House advisor, drawing a senior executive service level salary of \$179,700 in 2017 (FedSmith n.d.), with the potential to earn as much as \$189,600 per year in 2018 (OPM 2018; Kutner 2017; Shah and Kravitz 2017). It is unclear what his job description entails and whether he is operating as a de facto chief scientist without Senate approval and oversight.

***The public deserves to have policymakers with expertise making decisions on their behalf.***

**USDA general counsel nominee is unfit and contentious.**

The Trump administration’s choice to be the department’s top lawyer also raises flags. Stephen Vaden began working at the USDA just a few days after the inauguration and was appointed principal deputy general counsel two months later (Boudreau 2017a; Shah and Kravitz 2017). If confirmed as general counsel—a job that entails providing legal advice to the agriculture secretary and other USDA officials—he would oversee a staff of 250, despite reportedly having no previous management experience (Boudreau 2017a). Vaden defended his qualifications at his November 9, 2017, Senate confirmation hearing, arguing that he had been essentially doing the job for 11 months (Brasher 2017). That admission, however, could put him in violation of a federal law that prohibits most nominees for government positions from performing the duties of those positions in an “acting” capacity while awaiting Senate confirmation (a concern that also exists for several Trump administration nominees in other agencies) (Restuccia and Toosi 2017; US Congress 1998).

But there are also larger concerns about Vaden's fitness for the job of general counsel, a position that includes responsibility for ensuring the USDA's compliance with civil rights laws. At his confirmation hearing, members of the Senate Agriculture Committee raised questions about his past work defending state voter identification laws while employed at a private law firm. Voter identification laws are generally considered racist—a recent study showed they have negative effects on the turnout of voters of color (Hajnal, Lajevardi, and Nielson 2017)—and they have been struck down by courts in multiple states (Bowman 2016). The USDA already has a long and ugly history of discrimination against minority farmers, which has led to department payouts of billions of dollars to settle civil rights lawsuits in recent years (Boudreau 2017b; C. Johnson 2010). Vaden's past defense of racist laws does not position him well to ensure discrimination at the USDA does not happen again.

Meanwhile, the American Federation of Government Employees has formally opposed Vaden's nomination, citing his "contempt" for a labor contract between the general counsel's office and its staff of legal professionals, which he terminated as one of his first official acts in his acting capacity (AFGE 2017). Finally, Senate committee members are investigating allegations that, while working in the USDA in 2017, he oversaw transfers of USDA career employees to jobs outside their expertise (Boudreau 2017c). While Vaden has denied it, these reassignments appear to be politically motivated (Agri-Pulse 2017b).

#### **PERDUE HAS THREATENED HEALTH AND SAFETY BY UNDERMINING SCIENCE-BASED STANDARDS**

The USDA is responsible for applying science to ensure the US food system serves the public interest. This mission includes setting standards to maintain food safety, protect food system workers from job-related illness and injury, improve child nutrition, and alleviate hunger. In each of these areas, Secretary Perdue has initiated policy decisions that appear to override evidence and disregard the public interest in favor of agribusiness.

**USDA reversal on antibiotics in agriculture disregards science and ignores an urgent public health threat.** Overuse of antibiotics in animal agriculture is a significant threat

to public health. In the dominant industrial system of meat production, livestock and poultry raised in confined animal-feeding operations are often given regular doses of antibiotics to promote weight gain and to combat outbreaks of bacterial diseases that thrive in crowded conditions. Resistant bacteria that develop in animals raised for food can be transferred to the general human population via food and workers, adding to the antibiotic-resistance problem in human medicine (Paulson and Zaoutis 2015; CDC 2013).

In 2015, the Obama administration released a comprehensive, interagency plan to combat antibiotic-resistant bacteria. The plan included the objective to "eliminate the use of medically-important antibiotics for growth promotion in food animals and bring other agricultural uses of antibiotics, for treatment, control, and prevention of disease, under veterinary oversight," and it identified actions to be taken by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the USDA, with one-, three-, and five-year milestones (White House 2015). It is not clear whether those agencies have been keeping pace toward this objective under the Trump administration, but a November 2017 press release issued by the USDA in response to international action toward the same objective provided cause for concern.

That month, the World Health Organization (WHO)—the United Nations agency tasked with leading global public health efforts—issued new guidelines on the use of medically important antimicrobials in food-producing animals. The updated guidelines recommend that producers stop the routine use of antibiotics to promote growth and prevent disease in otherwise healthy animals (WHO 2017). The document serves as a strong (though nonbinding) recommendation that, if followed, would dramatically reduce on-farm antibiotic use in the United States and other countries. In a surprising response, the USDA issued a statement from its acting chief scientist calling the WHO recommendation "not in alignment with US policy and . . . not supported by sound science" (USDA 2017b).

The public health scientists at WHO based their recommendation on a review of various types of studies. They included studies characterized as "observational" (because they seek to understand cause-and-effect relationships through observation in situations where variables are not under researchers' control) alongside controlled experiments (which

***Overuse of antibiotics in livestock is a threat to public health, but the Trump USDA mischaracterizes the science.***



Bob Nichols/USDA

*Crowded, unsanitary conditions in CAFOs (confined animal feeding operations) leave poultry and livestock vulnerable to disease outbreaks. Antibiotics are used routinely to make animals grow faster and to prevent such outbreaks, and the resulting antibiotic-resistant bacteria can be passed on to the public via food and workers. The USDA under Secretary Perdue has criticized the science behind agriculture's role in this urgent public health problem, and may be reversing policy to combat it.*

are more precise but also more difficult to carry out, and thus fewer in number). Such wide-ranging literature reviews are common in science, and WHO acknowledged and justified making recommendations based on many types of studies “because the beneficial human health benefits (lowered prevalence of antimicrobial resistance in bacteria isolated from humans) strongly outweigh any potentially harmful or undesirable outcomes.” By charging that this approach is not sound science, the USDA’s critique either misunderstands or intentionally mischaracterizes it, perhaps because Secretary Perdue or others disagree with the policy conclusions that flow from such an approach (Borkowski 2017).

**Rollback of school meal rules puts children at risk.** Perdue has also taken aim at the USDA’s nutrition standards for federally subsidized meals served in schools, rules that affect tens of millions of US schoolchildren every day. Children consume more than half of their daily calories at school; for low-income and food-insecure children, this is likely an

underestimate (Haynes-Maslow and O’Hara 2015). With more than 45 million students eating meals and snacks at school each day (FNS 2017b; FNS 2017c), school meals offer a critical opportunity to support healthy behaviors and reduce long-term chronic disease risk, making evidence-based school nutrition standards one of the best public health tools at the government’s disposal. Studies suggest that the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) has provided one of the most effective strategies for reducing childhood obesity. These studies predict the policy will prevent more than 2 million cases over 10 years, leading researchers at the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health to name it “one of the most important national obesity prevention policy achievements in recent decades” (Gortmaker et al. 2015).

In May 2017, Perdue announced that his department would loosen key standards under the HHFKA established by the preceding administration, and the USDA formally issued a proposed new rule in November (USDA 2017c). The proposed rule, if implemented, would extend the use of

## Perdue's Climate Denial Could Threaten the Future of Farming

The evidence is overwhelming: record-breaking temperatures, humidity, and sea level rise, along with other indicators, show that the Earth is warming fast and that the heat-trapping emissions we release into the atmosphere from burning fossil fuels are changing our climate (UCS 2018). Climate change already has negatively affected agriculture, and these effects are expected to worsen with time. In a 186-page USDA technical bulletin published in 2012, experts from across the department detailed the expected effects on agriculture—rising temperatures and altered precipitation patterns leading to negative impacts on livestock; additional pressure on crops from weeds, diseases, and insect pests; potential changes in timing and coincidence of pollinator life cycles; increased soil erosion through extreme precipitation events; and regional and seasonal changes in the availability of water resources—all leading to reduced productivity and considerable uncertainty for farmers (Walthall et al. 2012).

Yet Secretary Perdue has cast doubt on the science of climate change, joining multiple other Trump administration officials as a vocal climate denier (Atkin 2017). He has referred to climate change as “a running joke” (Perdue 2014), and asserted that the science is unsettled and that “we don’t know definitively in my opinion what is causing climate change” (Lowe 2017). He has also supported several other high-level USDA nominees who have expressed climate change skepticism or outright denial; these include failed chief scientist nominee Sam Clovis (Mayer 2017) and Bill Northey, who was



Bob Nichols/USDA

*Secretary Perdue is one of many climate deniers in the Trump administration. He praised the president's decision to withdraw from international action to combat climate change, despite mounting evidence that US farmers and our food supply are vulnerable to its effects, which include increased frequency and severity of floods and droughts.*

confirmed as undersecretary for farm production and conservation in February 2018 and who previously cited “dueling scientists” to conclude that he has “no idea” what is causing climate change (Eller 2018; Love 2013).

Perdue's refusal to accept that climate change is real—and that, if left unchecked, it will have disastrous effects on farming and our food supply—could prove dangerous for US farmers. The National Farmers Union—a grassroots organization representing 200,000 farmers, fishers, and ranchers, with affiliates in 33 states—in early 2017 publicly urged President Trump to uphold the United States' commitment to global climate action (Clayton 2017). Yet when President Trump announced in June 2017 that he would withdraw the United States from the Paris climate accord, Secretary Perdue released a USDA statement that praised the decision, claiming that the accord “was not in the best interests of the United States.” His statement falsely claimed that the voluntary global climate agreement would cost the US economy “trillions of dollars and millions of jobs” while having a “negligible impact on world temperatures.” His statement minimized the impact of human activity on the climate:

*The Earth's climate has been changing since the planet was formed—on this there is no disagreement. At USDA, we rely on sound science and we remain firmly committed to digging ever deeper into research to develop better methods of agricultural production in that changing climate.*  
(USDA 2017e)

And though Perdue pays lip service, as agriculture secretary, to “sound science,” climate research at his USDA may be at risk. Under the previous administration, the USDA boosted climate-related research, spending more than \$650 million between 2009 and 2016 (Vilsack 2016). In 2014, the department established a network of regional “climate hubs” to translate science into practical advice and assistance to farmers (USDA 2014a; USDA n.d. b). Perdue has said that his office will look at how the hubs came to be and that if they are found to have an ideological bent, or come from a “politically correct position,” the USDA might find a “better way to research” (Runyon 2017).

The nation's farmers need more education, information, and support, not less, and they must hear about the need for climate action from sources they trust. To date, it does not appear that Secretary Perdue has taken concrete actions to undermine climate science at the USDA or to reverse the department's progress toward helping farmers cope. Still, his words on the topic of climate change are not reassuring.



*Taxpayer-subsidized school meals are a critical opportunity to improve nutrition, reduce childhood obesity, and create healthy eating habits for life. School nutrition rules were recently strengthened, but in 2017, Secretary Perdue moved to roll back key provisions, including allowing sugar-sweetened milk.*

waivers exempting certain processed food products from meeting the law's whole grain standards; delay the implementation of new low-sodium limits until after 2020; and allow schools to serve low-fat flavored (i.e., sugar-sweetened) milk, which is currently disallowed (USDA 2017c). Secretary Perdue's defense of the move was nonsensical: "This is not reducing the nutritional standards whatsoever," he told reporters, adding "I wouldn't be as big as I am today without flavored milk" (Ebbs and Dooley 2017).

The proposed changes to these nutrition standards contradict the best available nutritional science and the *2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, which explicitly recommend a healthy eating pattern that includes whole grains and limits added sugars, saturated fats, and sodium. The three standards affected by the proposed USDA rule are among a critical set of evidence-based nutrition standards that if weakened would increase an already serious threat to the nation's health and its future. The US childhood obesity rate tripled between the early 1970s and 2005 (Segal, Rayburn, and Beck 2017), prompting public health researchers to suggest that, for the first time in centuries, children may

have shorter life expectancies than their parents (Olshansky et al. 2005). And while the obesity rate has since plateaued at about 17 percent (CDC 2017), it is still too high.

Perdue's proposed rule cites several justifications for altering school nutrition standards, including providing more time for food manufacturers to reformulate products; helping children "gradually adjust to and enjoy school meals," to avoid decreases in school meal participation and consumption; and providing more time and flexibility for school food authorities to make procurement decisions and plan menu cycles.

***Perdue's rollback of school meal standards contradicts science and will affect nutrition for more than 45 million students.***

***The SNAP program has proven effective at reducing hunger and poverty, benefiting people in every community across the country, both rural and urban.***

But data collected by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) show that more than 99 percent of schools nationwide are already successfully meeting the nutrition standards put in place under the HHFKA (USDA 2016). Rather than helping children or struggling schools, the rule appears to be a gift to the processed food industry, as the chief executive officer of the International Dairy Foods Association all but acknowledged in a statement: "Today's action will help reverse declining milk consumption by allowing schools to provide kids with . . . the flavored milks they enjoy" (Bacon 2017).

**USDA intervention in EPA pesticide regulation threatens children and farmworkers.** In one of the Trump administration's first environmental actions, Scott Pruitt, a longtime critic of the EPA who had just been confirmed as its new administrator, announced in March 2017 that his agency would not ban the pesticide chlorpyrifos. The announcement halted a rule—set in motion by the Obama administration after years of study and deliberation by scientists at the EPA and elsewhere—that would have prohibited all remaining agricultural uses of this nerve-damaging insecticide, which poses a clear risk to children, farmworkers, and rural drinking water users (Stillerman 2017). In reversing the decision, Pruitt appeared to bow to the chemical's manufacturer, Dow AgroSciences (which had lobbied for the change and whose chairman had recently donated \$1 million to President Trump's inauguration fund) (Biesecker 2017). But he did not act alone; despite the EPA's duty to protect public health and its own scientists' findings of harm, it appears Pruitt took his cues from the USDA.

Emails and other documents obtained by the *New York Times* reveal a timeline that began during the transition, just days before President Trump's inauguration, with Dow lobbying the EPA to reject the ban and the USDA simultaneously expressing "grave concerns" about banning chlorpyrifos and calling on the EPA to change course (Lipton and Rabin 2017; OPMP 2017). In early March 2017, the documents show Pruitt assuring agribusiness lobbyists that it was "a new day" and that the Trump administration was "looking forward to working closely with the agricultural community" (presumably meaning agribusiness) (Lipton and Rabin 2017). By the end of that month, the decision to ban chlorpyrifos had been reversed.

**Perdue's ideological food stamp proposals would harm both urban and rural Americans.** The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, also known as food stamps) is the first line of defense against hunger for more than 21 million US households. Implemented by the FNS in coordination with states, SNAP is one of the largest and most effective strands in the federal safety net, lifting an estimated 4.7 million people—including 2.1 million children—out of poverty in 2014 (Reinhardt 2017a). This important program benefits people in every community across the country, in both urban and rural areas. In fact, a larger percentage of households in small towns and rural areas are using SNAP compared to urban areas, and UCS analysis has shown that of the 150 counties with the highest household SNAP usage, a full 136 are rural (Reinhardt 2018). Furthermore, research demonstrates that SNAP expenditures act as economic stimuli during periods of economic recession, with every five dollars in new SNAP benefits generating as much as nine dollars in economic activity (ERS 2016). Although abundant data show SNAP to be a smart investment in the nation's health and well-being, it is at risk of budget cuts and other harmful changes.



*Ample evidence shows that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, also known as food stamps) effectively reduces hunger and poverty while stimulating local economies during periods of recession. After promising not to seek changes to SNAP, Secretary Perdue reversed course, calling for deep budget cuts and other program changes that are not evidence-based, including replacing up to half of participants' monetary benefit with government-packed boxes consisting entirely of processed foods.*

In May 2017, newly confirmed Secretary Perdue appeared before the House Agriculture Committee to answer questions about his views on a variety of USDA programs. One committee member, noting the effectiveness of SNAP and anticipating that the Trump administration would attempt to cut its budget or change the rules to make it more difficult for participants to qualify, asked the secretary to discuss his plans for SNAP. In response, Perdue reassured the committee:

*I agree with all that you have said. It has been a very important, effective program. I am a continuing improvement guy; can we improve maybe the delivery and the processes and the protocols there? Yes. . . . But as far as I am concerned, we have no proposed changes. You don't try to fix things that aren't broken. And when the motto is, "Do right and feed everyone," I view that as very, very inclusive. (US Congress 2017)*

In the intervening 11 months, however, signals coming from Secretary Perdue and the White House about SNAP have changed dramatically. A November 2017 letter from the USDA to state officials who manage distribution of SNAP benefits signaled that they will soon have greater latitude in administering the program in their states. This latitude opens the door to tightened work requirements for beneficiaries and misguided initiatives such as drug testing of recipients (something Wisconsin's governor has pledged to do and that the FNS had previously not allowed). In that letter, and in other documents and public statements about SNAP, Perdue has raised the specter of "waste, fraud, and abuse" in the program, a concern that is at odds with SNAP's historically low rates of such problems (USDA 2018; Hallerman 2017; USDA 2017d).

The administration's fiscal 2019 budget request outlined deep spending reductions for SNAP, totaling more than \$213 billion in cuts over 10 years. The budget also proposed replacing up to half of the monthly monetary benefits for each SNAP recipient with shipments of government-provided boxes comprised entirely of processed (canned and shelf-stable) foods (OMB 2018a; OMB 2018b). That idea, billed by the administration as "innovative" and attributed directly to Secretary Perdue, has faced intense criticism from anti-hunger advocates, analysts, members of Congress, and others who say it would be administratively costly, inefficient, and stigmatizing (Dewey 2018a; Thrush 2018).

The president's USDA budget request also proposed major changes in eligibility for some SNAP participants. Under current rules, participants characterized by the USDA as able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) can receive benefits for only three months in any three-year period, unless they work at least 80 hours a month or participate in a

qualified job-training or volunteer program (FNS n.d.). States have broad discretion to grant waivers of that requirement, depending in part on local economic conditions and availability of jobs. The administration's proposal would limit state waivers to individual counties with very high unemployment rates and add new work requirements for adults ages 50 to 62, who are currently exempted. Similarly suggesting that the administration is seeking to tighten work requirements is a February 2018 advance notice of proposed USDA rule-making that seeks public input about work requirements for ABAWDs (Dewey 2018b; FNS 2018).

Overall, the administration's SNAP proposals display a lack of understanding of the program and appear to disregard evidence of its effectiveness and low fraud rate. Moreover, the administration's emphasis on work requirements ignores the fact that, according to the USDA's own figures, two-thirds of SNAP users are children, elderly people, or disabled people, and most participants who can work already do (FNS 2016). Rather than seeking to more effectively curb hunger and improve nutrition among low-income individuals and families, the proposals from Secretary Perdue and the White House seem ideologically based and designed to stigmatize and punish them.

#### **PERDUE HAS PRIORITIZED AGRIBUSINESS OVER FARMERS AND CONSUMERS IN USDA REORGANIZATION**

In May 2017, Secretary Perdue announced plans for a major reorganization of the USDA (USDA 2017f). Among other changes, Perdue's reorganization eliminated the USDA's rural development mission area and the undersecretary that formerly oversaw that area. He also established an undersecretary for trade and foreign agricultural affairs (TFAA), a move mandated by the 2014 farm bill but delayed under the Obama administration. Details of the new undersecretary's jurisdiction, along with later announcements about further organizational changes described below, do not bode well for rural development, conservation, nutrition, and other essential programs (Davies 2017; USDA 2017g).

**Dismantling of GIPSA and rollback of new rules leave farmers open to agribusiness exploitation.** The reorganization eliminated the USDA's Grain Inspection, Packers, and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA) as a stand-alone agency and moved some of its functions into a newly created fair trade practices division of the Agricultural Marketing Service. In concert with the organizational changes, Perdue rolled back a pair of GIPSA rules known collectively as the Farmer Fair Practices Rules, which the previous administration promulgated to make it easier for poultry and livestock farmers to sue meat processing companies with which they have



*Secretary Perdue has repeatedly prioritized the needs of agribusiness and global trade at the expense of small and midsize US farmers and rural communities. For example, by canceling two rules designed to ensure that agricultural companies treat farmers fairly, he is leaving small livestock and poultry producers vulnerable to exploitation by the corporate giants that control nearly every step of the production chain.*

contracts and to protect these contract farmers from unfair practices (USDA 2017h). With the rollback of these two rules, contract farmers will not realize newly gained protection from exploitation by the corporate giants that control nearly every step of the meat and poultry production chain.

The move has been widely seen as a gift to large livestock producers and an abandonment of small farmers (Hopkinson 2017b). The National Farmers Union called the move deeply disappointing, noting that the “USDA has given the green light to the few multinational meatpackers that dominate the market to discriminate against family farmers” (NFU 2017). And in December 2017, the Organization for Competitive Markets and three farmer plaintiffs filed a lawsuit alleging that Secretary Perdue’s USDA was “arbitrary and capricious” in rolling back the two rules (Matsumoto 2017).

**Relocation of Codex Office sidelines science and devalues food safety.** The little-known US Codex Office at the USDA handles relations with the international Codex Alimentarius Commission, a joint food safety effort by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization and WHO. The commission writes and updates a collection of standards and guidelines known as the Codex Alimentarius (“Food Code”), which is intended to protect public health and promote fair trade in food around the world (FAO and WHO n.d.). The US Codex Office—a domestic interagency partnership involving

the USDA; the FDA, which shares food safety authority with the USDA; the EPA; and other agencies—has historically been housed within the USDA’s Office of Food Safety. Contending that the focus of the Codex Office “aligns better with the mission” of the department’s new undersecretary for the TFAA, Secretary Perdue abruptly moved it under the jurisdiction of the TFAA (USDA 2017i).

Of the US agencies that make up the US Codex Office, only the USDA-TFAA has a mission to increase US agricultural exports and imports. By contrast, the FDA and the EPA are agencies whose food safety and environmental regulations are required by law to be science based. Perdue’s unilateral action to move the US Codex Office creates a potential conflict of interest, and risks the perception that the TFAA’s trade promotion mission and the interests of US agribusiness will override food safety. Indeed, in 2015, a National Academy of Public Administration panel assessing options for the TFAA’s jurisdiction “strongly and unanimously” recommended against moving the US Codex Office there, warning that such a move could compromise the actual and/or perceived independence of the FDA and the EPA as health and safety regulatory and scientific agencies. The panel acknowledged that moving the office “will not necessarily compromise science and regulations, but the likelihood that health and safety regulatory decisions would be unduly influenced by trade promotion priorities is increased. Furthermore, the US is a leader

internationally in advocating and supporting science-based trade policy. Conflating science and trade by putting them in the same mission area will, at a minimum, affect perceptions of scientific integrity and undermine USDA's trade positions" (Offutt et al. 2015). Officials at the FDA charged that Secretary Perdue's team at the USDA failed to consult with them before announcing the change and voiced similar concerns about the credibility of the FDA's scientists if the move went forward (Flynn 2017a).

The timing of the move is also suspect, as it coincided with the arrival of Ted McKinney as the new undersecretary for the TFAA. McKinney was a longtime executive at a major veterinary drug company (Elanco) whose products—including a veterinary drug called ractopamine—have been at the center of the largest Codex Office fights (Flynn 2017b; *Hagstrom Report* 2017). Former food safety officials and watchdogs have sharply criticized the move and the appearance that it was motivated by industry interests (Evich 2017c).

**Merger of nutrition agencies threatens science-based dietary guidance for all Americans.** Another aspect of Perdue's USDA reorganization involves merging two of the department's key nutrition agencies, combining the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP) with the much larger FNS. While this may seem like a streamlining effort, erasing the boundaries between these independent agencies has the potential to threaten the scientific integrity of the CNPP and compromise public health, while providing no demonstrable financial or public benefit.

Established in 1994, the CNPP is responsible for reviewing and compiling scientific literature on human nutrition; developing measures of dietary quality, such as the Healthy Eating Index; and (jointly with the Department of Health and Human Services) issuing the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, the cornerstone of federal nutrition policy and dietary guidance (CNPP n.d.). At a time when more than 117 million Americans—half of all adults—are living with one or more preventable, diet-related chronic diseases, the role that the CNPP plays in protecting public health is vital. Importantly, it serves a distinctly different purpose than the FNS. While the latter administers nutrition programs (including SNAP) that serve a fraction of Americans, the CNPP develops the science-based recommendations to identify nutritional deficiencies and address dietary needs across the nation's population, and those recommendations are then applied to dozens of programs across the federal government.

Under the reorganization, the CNPP leadership will likely lack appropriate credentials to oversee the development of evidence-based national nutrition guidelines. Following the reorganization, the CNPP would be headed by a career

deputy administrator, who would be unlikely to possess the education and level of expertise required for this position. Further, nutrition programs administered by the FNS must adhere to dietary recommendations established by the CNPP, introducing a potential conflict of interest. Without clear separation between the CNPP and the FNS, undue influence on the former by the latter—or even the perception thereof—would present a threat to the integrity of evidence-based recommendations (Reinhardt 2017b).

#### **PERDUE HAS FAILED TO PUSH FOR POLICIES THAT SERVE THE NEEDS OF MOST FARMERS**

In addition to the programs and policies he oversees at the USDA, Secretary Perdue is also in a position—as a member of the president's cabinet—to influence other federal policies that affect farmers and rural America. In one widely publicized instance early in his tenure, Perdue reportedly challenged President Trump's position on trade and at least temporarily dissuaded him from pulling the United States out of the North American Free Trade Agreement—a move that would have harmed American farmers by throwing regional trade in agricultural commodities into chaos (Persons 2018; Hensch 2017). In other key areas, however, he has failed to push back or has served as a cheerleader for White House policy proposals that will not help, and will likely hurt, farmers and rural Americans. Moreover, as the leader of a months' long interagency effort to identify policy options that would increase rural prosperity, he failed to offer much in the way of innovative solutions.

#### **Trump administration budget would gut USDA science and cut programs for farmers and rural communities.**

The Trump administration's fiscal 2019 budget request is the first one to be crafted under Secretary Perdue's watch. It would reduce the overall USDA budget by 25 percent from its 2017 level, including cuts to agriculture research and technical assistance programs that support clean water, farms, and a safe food supply. In particular, the budget proposal would

***Perdue has served as a cheerleader for White House policy proposals that will not help, and will likely hurt, farmers and rural Americans.***

cut the USDA's Economic Research Service in half and cut its Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education Program by nearly one-quarter (OMB 2018a; OMB 2018b).

The administration's budget request would also completely eliminate the Conservation Stewardship Program and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program. These popular programs support conservation on millions of acres of US farmland by offering financial incentives to farmers and facilitating local projects to protect soil, reduce water pollution in rural communities and downstream cities, increase wildlife habitats, and meet other conservation goals.

**Championed by Perdue, the administration's tax policy will not help farmers—and may hurt them.** Throughout the summer and fall of 2017, Secretary Perdue acted as a tireless surrogate for President Trump in support of the tax cut plan, arguing that the plan “will be of great benefit to agriculture and help improve rural prosperity” (USDA 2017j). In a newspaper op-ed, press releases, and a steady stream of tweets, he championed the president's plan, particularly singling out the administration's targeting of the estate tax (or, as Perdue put it, “the most unjust tax ever imposed—the ‘death tax’”) as a potential boon to farmers (Perdue 2017a; Perdue 2017b; USDA 2017k).

However, Perdue's advocacy was not aligned with evidence. While there are some 2 million farms across the United States (USDA 2014b), tax policy researchers estimated that only 50 small farm and small business estates in the entire country would pay any estate tax in 2017. The USDA's own economists estimated that only 161 farms of any size owed any estate tax during the previous year (ERS 2017; Huang and Cho 2017). So who will benefit? Heirs of President Trump and many members of his cabinet, including Secretary Perdue, are likely to see gains from the estate tax change written into the final Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. According to one analysis, Perdue's heirs stand to reap \$2.2 million in savings (Straus 2017).

As for the impact of the rest of the tax law, independent analysis suggests that the bulk of the benefits will go to higher-income households (TPC 2017). An assessment by one national agricultural accounting firm suggests that the benefits to most farmers will be temporary (Fatka 2017). And while short-term tax relief might still be a good thing, the reform package backed by Secretary Perdue missed an opportunity to provide real benefit to farmers. Research by USDA economists, presented at an economics conference just one week after the president signed the bill, projected that 70 to 80 percent of its benefits will go to the top 1 percent of farm households by income, that 20 percent of farm households (those earning the least) will see their taxes go up, and that



Edwin Remsburg/USDA-SARE

*Cover crops are one of many tools that can improve farmers' long-term sustainability—they reduce soil erosion, cut fertilizer costs, support clean water, and improve crop yields. But Trump administration budget proposals have included cuts to research programs, technical assistance, and financial incentives that help farmers implement such tools.*

farm productivity will decrease because of the law (Swanson and Tankersley 2018; Bawa and Williamson 2018; Beckman, Gopinath, and Tsigas 2018).

**Perdue-led interagency task force on rural prosperity offers few new solutions.** On Secretary Perdue's first day at the USDA in April 2017, President Trump signed an executive order establishing an interagency task force “to identify legislative, regulatory, or policy changes to promote American agriculture, economic development, job growth, infrastructure improvements, technological innovation, energy security, and quality of life in rural America” (White House 2017). Secretary Perdue chaired the task force, whose membership included 13 cabinet members, along with various policy advisors and heads of other executive agencies and offices. Nine months later, the task force officially presented its recommendations (USDA 2017l), in conjunction with an appearance by Perdue and the president at the annual meeting of the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) in Nashville, Tennessee.

While the AFBF touted the president's commitment to rural development (AFBF 2018), other groups representing family farmers and rural constituencies panned the task force report as long on rhetoric and short on specifics (Oates and Marema 2018). It offers few innovations and has little to say about the future of existing USDA programs that support community development, water and sewer systems, and other infrastructure. The most concrete action associated with the

president's appearance in Nashville was a pair of executive orders on expanding broadband access in rural communities—which, while speaking to an important need, offered little in the way of new federal investments (Rogers 2018). As for the Trump administration's overall impact on rural America, the nonprofit Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy gave the administration a failing grade at the end of its first year, citing “a pattern of cynical disregard for rural communities, hostility toward science, and an unbridled scorn for the principles and practice of democratic governance” (Majot 2018).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Science-based decisionmaking in the public interest is critical to the future of our food and agriculture system. The challenges to producing an abundant, nutritious, and safe food supply and ensuring that all of us have access to it are increasing, as are the threats that our current industrial agriculture system poses to our environment. But the Trump administration's USDA is failing to apply science to solve these problems. Our examination of the department during its first year under Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue reveals a troubling record of sidelining science on behalf of the agribusiness industry, stripping away evidence-based health and safety protections, shrinking the social safety net, and betraying consumers, farmers, and rural communities in the process. We the public need to be vigilant to make sure this does not continue and to hold officials accountable.

In our July 2017 report *Sidelining Science Since Day One*, UCS offered general recommendations to safeguard evidence-based decisionmaking in the public interest. We recommended that scientists and science supporters scrutinize administration and congressional actions, sound the alarm when science is misused, and communicate the importance of science and science-based policies to the public. We urged Congress to exercise its full authority as a check against the executive branch by using its oversight authorities to investigate and hold accountable the administration for actions that threaten scientific integrity and science-based policies, and by protecting whistleblowers. And we appealed to journalists to hold public officials accountable for their words and actions and to investigate cases of suppressing, misrepresenting, manipulating, or otherwise politicizing science.

Now, in light of the evidence that USDA policymaking is sidelining science at the expense of consumers, farmers, food system workers, and rural communities, we offer the following further recommendations:

- **Congress, and particularly its agriculture committees, should increase oversight of the USDA.** These committees have a duty to ensure that USDA officials are complying with ethics rules and agreements and that Secretary Perdue's ongoing departmental reorganization is furthering the public interest. The committees should vigorously investigate allegations of compromised scientific integrity, conflicts of interest, and other violations of ethics rules, and ensure that the department is fulfilling its mandate to support and protect farmers and consumers.
- **The White House should put forward, and the Senate should confirm, a well-qualified nominee for USDA chief scientist.** The Senate should make clear that it will not confirm any nominee for the position of USDA undersecretary for research, economics, and education who does not have the scientific or economic training or experience required by law.
- **USDA dietary guidelines and nutrition programs should rely on the best available science.** As the USDA begins work on the next update of the federal dietary recommendations, Secretary Perdue should ensure that the department seeks, receives, and implements sound and independent scientific advice.
- **Congress should fully fund the USDA's research agencies.** Congressional appropriators should disregard proposals from the White House and Secretary Perdue that call for deep cuts in research and education programs that are important to consumers, farmers, and rural communities.
- **Congress should ensure that any changes to SNAP are evidence based and in the public interest.** Using its oversight authority and its legislative role in reauthorizing the farm bill, Congress should guard against ill-conceived, ideological cuts and eligibility changes to this important social safety net.

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# Betrayal at the USDA

*How the Trump Administration Is Sidelining Science and Favoring Industry over Farmers and the Public*

***The Trump USDA is sidelining science, betraying consumers, farmers, and rural communities in the process.***

The US Department of Agriculture touches our lives every day, shaping our nation's food system from farm to fork. The department's policies and programs affect farmers' decisions about what they grow and how they grow it; the infrastructure and services available in rural communities; the quality of the nation's soil and water resources; and the healthfulness, price, and selection of food offered to consumers everywhere. When these policies and programs are based on scientific evidence and prioritize the well-being of consumers, farmers, and workers, it makes our communities and our country stronger.

Yet science is too often sidelined from important public decisionmaking by people with something to gain. This report

examines the farm and food policy record of the Trump administration's USDA during its first year under Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue. It reveals a troubling record of sidelining science on behalf of the agribusiness industry, stripping away evidence-based health and safety protections, shrinking the social safety net, and betraying consumers, farmers, and rural communities in the process. We recommend that Congress increase oversight of the department, fully fund its research and education programs, and insist that its leaders make policy decisions based on science and the public interest.

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