

US Department of Agriculture to close 259 field offices

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The federal Department of Agriculture, responsible for safety enforcement over much of the nation's grain, poultry, and livestock producers, has announced closures of 259 field offices. The cuts come after a string of major outbreaks of food-borne illness in the past year and deep reductions in federal and state-level regulatory agencies.

Farm service agencies, rural development offices, testing labs, research stations, and Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) offices across the country are to be closed, for an estimated savings of \$60 million. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in a statement that \$90 million more had been cut through reducing travel and supplies. The USDA's annual budget is presently \$145 billion, only a fraction of which is dedicated to ensuring the safety of the food supply.

The USDA said closures are to begin in late winter and conclude by July, with more cuts to be announced later.

The announcement came without warning to many of the estimated 100,000 USDA workers. Andrew Lorenz, deputy district manager for the FSIS in Minneapolis, told the Associated Press, "They wiped out the entire Midwest." FSIS offices in Madison, Wisconsin, and Lawrence, Kansas, are also to be shuttered. The Minneapolis office oversees inspections of all meat, poultry, and egg products in the upper Midwest.

Called a "Blueprint for Stronger Service," the closures are part of a broad effort by the Obama administration, under the so-called Campaign to Cut Waste, of decimating federal regulatory powers over industry. Since 2010, the administration has overseen a 12 percent cut to the USDA's operating budget.

"Our workload is at record highs, we have less money and fewer people and work to do and we tried to address how do you do that without interrupting

service," Vilsack commented to the AP. "Over the long haul, we believe farmers and ranchers across the country will be better served by the choices we made."

In the past 15 months, 7,000 USDA employees took early retirement offers. "These departures have allowed us the flexibility to eliminate positions or restructure positions to be more relevant to the needs of our customers," Vilsack said in comments to a January 9 meeting of the American Farm Bureau Federation, published by farm industry journal *AgriPulse*. "Many of the positions we will fill will be at pay rates less than before."

A spokesman for the California cotton growers' cooperative Calcot noted the international impact that the USDA's research stations have had in combating blight and pests. "This is going to be to the detriment of the US cotton industry and ultimately the world because so much research there has benefited growers everywhere," Mark Bagby said.

Iowa State University farm economist Bruce Babcock expressed concern over the effect the cuts would have on the USDA's ability to maintain programs focusing on disease prevention. "The capability to collect data and do the behind-the-scenes activities that really help US agriculture stay safe, that should be concerning," he told the AP.

US food oversight is in tatters. The federal Food and Drug Administration, which is charged with overseeing a portion of the food supply, lacks the budget and personnel to conduct its own inspections; by its own figures, it inspects only 5 percent of domestic facilities and less than 2 percent of imported food products. In the past decade, it has been increasingly reliant upon state-level agencies to inspect food-processing facilities. A recent audit of the FDA by the federal Office of the Inspector General found that nearly two

out of three of the FDA's inspections were contracted to state offices, and that more than half of all food facilities have gone five years or longer without a single FDA inspection.

A report issued last month by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Trust for America's Health highlighted the consequences of federal and state-level budget cuts on emergency response to food-borne illness outbreaks and other public health problems. Funding for public health programs was cut in 40 states in the past year, coming atop year-over-year cuts in at least 29 states. These coincide with federal-level cuts to Public Health Emergency Preparedness funding.

As a consequence, the patchwork of local, state, and federal public health agencies are uncoordinated and ill-prepared to contain outbreaks. Most agencies lack authority over food producers to enforce a recall; instead, public health is subordinated to the "voluntary cooperation" of private industry, which has an interest in keeping knowledge of tainted products hidden from the population. This state of affairs has produced wave after wave of mass food poisoning.

Dozens of people were killed from tainted food in 2011. Beginning in July, an outbreak of *Listeria* associated with Colorado-grown cantaloupes sickened at least 146 people across 28 states. At least 30 people died. The outbreak was among the deadliest since the federal government began tracking illnesses from tainted foods a century ago.

In August, a multistate outbreak of *Salmonella* poisoning associated with ground turkey sickened more than 136 people and resulted in at least one death. In November, another *Salmonella* outbreak, linked to chicken livers, made more than 179 people ill. These outbreaks were of particular concern to public health officials because of the link between the extensive use of antibiotics in the livestock and poultry industries—which the USDA oversees—and the particularly virulent, multidrug-resistant strain of *Salmonella* that has been linked to severe cases of food poisoning. In very young, aged, or otherwise vulnerable groups, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes, "antibiotic resistance may be associated with an increased risk of hospitalization or possible treatment failure in infected individuals."

Food-borne illness is exceedingly common in the US.

The CDC estimates some 76 million pathogen-induced cases of food poisoning occur each year, causing 127,000 hospitalizations and at least 3,000 deaths.

The USDA web site maps counties that will see closures.



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