

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Nomination Hearing: January 23, 2025
Ms. Brooke Rollins, of Texas, to be Secretary of Agriculture
Questions for the Record

Chairman John Boozman

1. **Line Speeds** - Since the 1990s, successive administrations have worked to modernize USDA's food safety inspection system by improving meat and poultry processing efficiency while maintaining food safety. This has included allowing pork and poultry plants who opt-in to the New Swine Inspection System (NSIS) and New Poultry Inspection System (NPIS) to operate at higher line speeds. In 2021, a Minnesota district court blocked a Trump administration rule that allowed pork plants to operate at higher line speeds, claiming USDA failed to properly take into account the impacts on worker safety. The Biden administration attempted to find a path forward by initiating trials that allowed certain plants to receive short-term waivers to operate at higher line speeds in exchange for participating in worker safety studies. Unfortunately, USDA continued to expand its demands of plants participating in these studies, while offering no long-term certainty. The ongoing pork and poultry trials have now been extended until May 15. As Secretary, will you make it an immediate priority to provide certainty to these processors and work with the Committee to develop a long-term path forward on this issue?

I have been made aware of a study released in January of 2025 that examines the impacts of increased line speeds on worker safety at processing plants. I will work with my team to review this study, as well as other relevant studies, and take such information into account regarding any future rulemaking, if confirmed.

2. **Packers and Stockyards Act** - Dating back to 2010, the previous three administrations have considered a series of rules under the Packers and Stockyards Act, which have been incredibly divisive amongst the agriculture sector. The Obama administration grossly overstepped its authority under the Packers and Stockyards Act implementing what was known as the GIPSA rule, which resulted in Congress preventing the finalization of the rulemaking for three years, although it was finalized in the final weeks of the Obama administration. President Trump's administration rescinded the interim final rule in 2017. The Biden Administration divided the Obama era rule into four separate rulemakings, of which three were finalized. The finalization of these rules led directly to higher regulatory compliance costs for meat and poultry companies, which in turn led to food inflation for consumers. As Secretary, will you make it a priority to roll back the regulatory overreach of the Biden administration and to ensure USDA's regulatory framework follows the intent of Congress laid out under the Packers and Stockyards Act?

I cannot commit to altering rules that I have not yet had the opportunity to review, but I will commit to engaging with Congress as appropriate.

3. **Accelerating Broadband Deployment to Rural Communities** – According to the Federal Communications Commission, roughly 24 million Americans, many of whom live in rural communities, still lack access to a basic broadband connection. While USDA has programs to make significant progress in eliminating the digital divide, the outgoing administration has focused its efforts on a one size fits all approach to communications infrastructure deployment. While fiber optic infrastructure may be the gold standard for some communities, it is often far too expensive and cumbersome to deploy in rural and remote areas that have low population density, challenging topography, geology or all of the above. USDA also currently prioritizes applications from Internet Service Providers (ISPs) that commit to net neutrality principles and union workforce standards that often drive up the cost of deployment and which are not required in statute. What are your thoughts on ways to accelerate the pace of broadband deployment and will you commit to allowing ISPs the flexibility to deploy communications infrastructure that best fits the needs of the communities?

If confirmed, exploring improvements to USDA’s Rural Development programs will be chief among my priorities, including ensuring rural broadband programs satisfy the needs of every rural community. Gaps in rural broadband negatively impact schools, businesses, and rural Americans just trying to complete life’s daily tasks.

If confirmed, I look forward to gaining a fuller understanding of the programmatic debates described above, and I will work to expand rural broadband deployment.

4. **USDA Office of Pest Management Policy** – USDA’s Office of Pest Management Policy (OPMP) develops and coordinates the Department’s policy on pesticides and integrated pest management. OPMP also provides vital scientific analysis and agronomic data to EPA’s Office of Pesticide Programs to help inform EPA’s risk-assessments and economic benefits on the registration and re-registration of crop protection tools. EPA’s timely, predictable, transparent, and science-based review of these products is critical to ensuring the availability of these tools to protect against pests and diseases. OPMP also plays a significant role in coordinating agricultural biotechnology regulations with USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, EPA, and FDA. As USDA Secretary, will you continue to strengthen OPMP to ensure EPA appropriately incorporates OPMP’s analysis into EPA’s registration decisions and will you ensure robust collaboration between USDA, EPA, and FDA to maintain a risk-based, science-based approach to pesticide regulation that accounts for the critical role these tools play in American agriculture?

If confirmed, I will ensure USDA’s Office of Pest Management Policy (OPMP) is well-positioned to assist Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) with scientific and agronomic data, as well as the views

of farmers, with respect to crop protection tools. I will personally encourage robust collaboration between USDA, EPA, and FDA on these matters.

Eliminating Environmental Review for RD Loan Guarantee Projects - The Fiscal Responsibility Act (FRA), which was signed into law in 2023, amended the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to mitigate the regulatory burdens brought about by environmental reviews for certain actions not considered “major federal actions”. Specifically, the FRA clarified that NEPA review is not required for certain loans or loan guarantees, where agencies lack control over the project, such as USDA’s One RD loan guarantee programs. By complying with the FRA, USDA can streamline a cumbersome process that often results in delays for projects located in rural communities and in dire need of economic development. Will you commit to working with staff at USDA and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to quickly finalize a regulation to ensure that USDA is compliant with the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023?

I will work with staff at USDA and at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to streamline processes at USDA, including in the Rural Development mission area, thereby leading to more timely economic development and overall advancement of rural prosperity.

Ranking Member Amy Klobuchar

1. **Responsiveness to Congress:** If you are confirmed, I look forward to working with you. If confirmed, do you agree, without reservation, to:
 - a. Promptly reply to any request for information from me or any duly constituted committee of Congress and provide the requested information?

I will respond promptly and appropriately.

- b. Respond to my requests for data and technical assistance in informing or drafting legislation or implementation of the law?

I will respond promptly and appropriately.

- c. Notify me or my staff in advance of any public announcement of any major changes made by you or within the Department of Agriculture during your tenure?

I will make every reasonable attempt to appropriately notify Congress of impending action by the Department.

- d. Provide to this Committee any reports provided by USDA to the Senate Appropriations Committee or the Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee?

I will respond promptly and appropriately.

- 2. **Oversight:** Congress, along with the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the Inspectors General, play a critical role in providing oversight of the executive branch, regardless of Administration.
 - a. In your previous role in the executive branch, did you work on responding to any oversight requests from Congress, GAO, or an Inspector General, and if so, how would you describe your approach to those oversight requests?

I intend to work with Congress, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), and/or the Inspector General as appropriate.

- b. If confirmed, will you commit to responding promptly and thoroughly to Members of Congress (regardless of party), GAO, and the Inspector General on all oversight requests?

Yes.

- 3. **Department Operations/Staffing:** President Trump recently signed a series of executive orders that have started to impact USDA programs, operations, and staffing at the same time that USDA has been provided over \$30 billion in resources that need to reach farmers in a timely manner. An overly broad or lengthy hiring freeze could interfere with delivery of this assistance. If confirmed, will you commit to providing complete, timely, and accurate data to both majority and minority staff of this Committee, on a monthly basis regarding:
 - a. The number of vacancies, status of the hiring freeze, and exemptions sought and granted within each USDA agency and office?

I will do so when appropriate and when information is available. I look forward to remaining in touch with your office on these requests.

- b. Retirements and terminations by USDA agency, position, grade, and schedule (if the position is in the excepted service)?

I will do so when appropriate and when information is available. I look forward to remaining in touch with your office on these requests.

- c. The number, grade, schedule (if the position is in the excepted service), and agency of each employee put on leave, terminated, transferred, or retired as a

result of actions taken under any of the executive orders that affect USDA staffing or operations?

I will do so when appropriate and when information is available. I look forward to remaining in touch with your office on these requests.

4. **Disbursement of Funds:** This week, President Trump signed an executive order that directed agencies to pause the disbursement of funds appropriated under the Inflation Reduction Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.
- a. Has USDA paused the disbursement of funds pursuant to this executive order?

As I am not confirmed, I do not have access to this information at this time.

- b. If so, which programs have had disbursements paused and what is the legal basis for the pause?

Again, as I am not confirmed, I do not have access to this level of information at this time.

- c. If confirmed, will you commit to promptly providing to my staff a detailed explanation of the legal basis on which USDA has paused the disbursement of funds, a complete list of programs with paused disbursements, and an estimate of when USDA expects to resume disbursements for each affected program?

If confirmed, and to the extent appropriate, I will work to provide information to your office on the referenced activities.

- d. If confirmed, will you commit to implementing all programs and administering all funds as appropriated by Congress within your purview at USDA?

If confirmed, I will follow the law.

- e. If confirmed, will you commit to notifying my staff prior to any future pauses on any funds appropriated by Congress within your purview at USDA?

I will make every reasonable attempt to notify Congress of impending action by the Department as appropriate.

5. **Rural America:** The Secretary of Agriculture is often seen as the leading advocate for rural America.

- a. How will you navigate policy proposals from the Trump Administration that will likely have a disproportionate impact on rural communities, from proposals to privatize the U.S. Postal Service to eliminating the Department of Education?

If confirmed, my priority will be the communities impacted by programs under USDA's jurisdiction, and I will collaborate with other agencies where appropriate.

- b. How do you plan to use your position to ensure federal programs are more accessible to rural communities that need them most?

When farmers prosper, rural America prospers. If confirmed, I will do everything within my ability to ensure rural communities thrive. As I implement the President's agenda, I will prioritize first-rate customer service throughout USDA's programs.

6. Scientific Integrity:

- a. Do you believe that climate change presents a threat to American farmers and ranchers? If so, how?

We all know the climate changes throughout the year, but the cause and solutions are not widely understood or defined.

- b. What role do you believe USDA's research agencies play in making sure American farmers and ranchers have the tools they need to succeed in the face of a changing climate?

I am aware that, for decades, USDA's research agencies have conducted or otherwise supported research that helps farmers and ranchers adapt to the risks they face, and if confirmed, I will continue to support the tools and programs that reduce risks for farmers.

- c. If confirmed, will you commit to not interfering with scientific research, either conducted by USDA scientists or through external grantees, that relates to climate change?

I will work to make certain the Department utilizes sound data and adheres to the law.

- d. If confirmed, will you commit that no career USDA personnel will be dismissed in the future because they participated in research or USDA programs that dealt with climate change issues under the last Administration?

If confirmed, I will work to better understand the foundation for this question.

- e. How will you support the scientific integrity and independence of USDA researchers?

I will work to make certain the Department utilizes sound data and adheres to the law.

- 7. **Nutrition:** The Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service was established at USDA almost 60 years ago and oversees the nation’s domestic nutrition programs that provide food assistance to one in four Americans, many of whom are children, seniors, or veterans, who struggle to access adequate food for themselves and their families. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the National School Breakfast, School Lunch, and Summer Nutrition programs; the Child and Adult Care Food Program; the Special Supplemental Nutrition for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP); the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations; the Commodity Supplemental Food Program; and the Farmer Market programs each play an important role in improving the health and well-being of families and the economy.
 - a. If confirmed, will you commit to keeping these nutrition programs at USDA?

Yes, and if confirmed, I also commit to partnering with other agencies who help low-income communities and families thrive.

- b. If confirmed, will you commit to support funding for all of the nutrition programs at USDA and work with me to protect access to these programs for all individuals in need and prevent changes that would reduce the effectiveness of these critical programs?

I do not want to get ahead of the President as he works to formulate a budget. However, if confirmed, I do commit to hearing from all interests of the Department as that budget is crafted.

- 8. **Nutrition:** The most recent Household Food Security Report from USDA revealed that 18 million households were food insecure in 2023. Current SNAP benefits average at \$6.20 per person per day. If confirmed, how do you plan to address food insecurity in this country?

As I mentioned in my confirmation hearing, I will undertake a comprehensive review of all nutrition programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), to better understand their reach, administration, and effectiveness. SNAP is a supplemental, temporary program, meant to help families navigate challenging times. We absolutely must ensure that approximately \$100 billion in taxpayer funded benefits are working well to help sustain and support families as they work to get back on the path to independence. If confirmed, I look forward to working with my fellow cabinet members across the board, in health, housing, education and other departments, to address the needs of families on the program and help lift them to success and self-sufficiency.

9. **Nutrition:** The 2018 Farm Bill required a reevaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan – which is the basis for SNAP benefits – every 5 years, based on current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance. In 2021, USDA reevaluated the Thrifty Food Plan using updated food price data that better reflected food prices paid by households, including SNAP recipients, following a healthier consumption pattern. This was the first meaningful update to the Thrifty Food Plan in nearly 50 years and resulted in a modest increase of \$1.35 per day for SNAP benefits. Do you believe SNAP benefits should be calculated based on current food prices for a healthy diet, as required by the 2018 Farm Bill?

Per press and other public reports I have read, the 2021 update appears to have had its share of controversy, including shortcomings in the process and its violation of the Congressional Review Act, as also referenced in two GAO reports. Not to mention it added more than \$250 billion to the program over the ten-year budget window, which again according to public releases, had both limited public input and Congressional oversight. If confirmed, I intend to prioritize not only a review of the 2021 process and outcome, but also any work on the 2026 update initiated under the Biden-Harris Administration.

10. **Nutrition:** The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides nutritious foods, breastfeeding support, nutrition education, and health care referrals to low-income pregnant and post-partum women, infants, and young children at nutritional risk. As Secretary of Agriculture, you would oversee WIC administration.
- a. Since the 1990s, every presidential administration has supported fully funding the program to meet the needs of all eligible families who seek services. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting full funding for WIC to continue serving all eligible families who seek services?

I do not want to get ahead of the President as he works to formulate a budget. However, if confirmed, I do commit to hearing from all interests of the Department as that budget is crafted.

- b. Currently, state WIC programs are implementing an updated food package for the first time in over a decade to better align WIC foods with the latest nutrition science and give WIC participants more choices at the grocery store. Changes to the food packages at this time would create confusion for participants and administrative burden for states. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting states in continuing to implement the food package updates without delay?

If confirmed, I will commit to reviewing this State action and am happy to continue the conversation with your office.

11. **Nutrition:** The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) provides school districts the option of serving meals at no charge during the school day in high-need schools and school districts. Eligible schools consider not only CEP's link to increased school meal participation and fewer behavioral issues and visits to the school nurse during the school day, but also the potential administrative savings, paperwork reduction, and cost-effectiveness prior to making a determination of whether to participate. Nearly 20 million children across the country attend schools that have adopted CEP. In my state of Minnesota, which has adopted no-charge meals across the state, school food service providers have cited seeing many families, including moderate income families and middle-class families, grappling with their food budgets going up.

- a. If confirmed, will you commit to opposing changes to CEP that would increase the burden on children and families in need?

First, we need to address the issues creating challenges for all families, which will require a collaborative effort with other agencies. If confirmed, I will work to better understand the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), including its growth in recent years.

- b. If you do support changes to the program, how will you work to ensure that all eligible students continue to receive school meals without disruption, particularly in communities that rely on the program the most and are disproportionately adversely impacted by high grocery processes?

Until I have a better understanding of CEP, it is difficult to answer this question. If confirmed, I commit to a thorough review of CEP, along with the programs impacted by it, and am happy to continue the conversation with your office.

12. **Economic and Disaster Assistance Implementation:** In recent years, USDA has taken important actions to simplify administration of ad hoc disaster programs by calculating and pre-filling applications for certain phases of programs like the Emergency Relief Program (ERP) and on the recent specialty crop assistance (MASC).

- a. If confirmed, will you commit to implementation of economic and disaster assistance under the American Relief Act in a manner that is expeditious and simple for producers?

I am absolutely committed to implementing the American Relief Act in an expeditious manner and to making it as streamlined as possible for recipient producers.

- b. And if confirmed, will you commit to working with me to prioritize quick action to address the losses brought on by disaster conditions in Minnesota?

As stated during the hearing, deploying the more than \$30 billion in economic and natural disaster assistance recently authorized by Congress as quickly and effectively as possible (including by the 90-day deadline for economic assistance) is a top priority. I'm hopeful the Senate will quickly consider and confirm the President's nominees for Deputy Secretary and for Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation program activities, so as to ensure smooth and timely deployment of the assistance. I look forward to working with you on implementation.

13. **Financial Disclosure:** According to your financial disclosure and as reported on in the press, you received \$1,050,000 in income in 2024 from America First Policy Institute, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. How was your salary calculated?

The America First Policy Institute Board of Directors, at its discretion, sets my compensation. From my limited understanding, the Board took a four-year holistic approach in its assessment.

14. **Ethics/Conflicts of Interest:** According to your financial disclosures and Office of Government Ethics paperwork, your family has significant financial interests in the oil and gas industry, raising potential conflicts in connection with USDA's biofuel programs and responsibilities.

- a. Please describe the actions you will take, following your agreement with the Office of Government Ethics, to remove any conflicts of interest between your family's oil and gas financial interests and any potential work on biofuels.

If confirmed, I will consult with the USDA Office of Ethics career officials on conflicts of interest.

- b. If confirmed, will you commit to following the advice and guidance of USDA's Designated Agency Ethics Official to avoid any conflicts of interest?

If confirmed, I will consult with the USDA Office of Ethics career officials on conflicts of interest.

15. **Forest Service:** Last year was another challenging year for wildfire with almost 9 million acres burned – an amount above the 10-year average of acres burned. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law brought federal wildland firefighter pay closer to industry standards, but a permanent reform remained elusive last Congress despite strong support from the USDA and many in Congress.
- a. Under your leadership, will the USDA continue to support permanent pay reform for federal wildland firefighters?

If confirmed, I stand ready to work with Congress.

- b. Will you be a voice within the Administration for supporting federal wildland firefighters and other Forest Service employees as they face pay and housing challenges?

America faces great challenges ahead from the wildfire crisis to housing affordability. If confirmed, I will work to ensure we have the best and most qualified workforce in USDA’s history. The wildland firefighters put their lives on the line to keep our communities safe, and I look forward to understanding the challenges they face.

16. **Forest Service:** The Forest Service has adopted – and is implementing – a Wildfire Crisis Strategy to reduce wildfire risks faced by communities, critical infrastructure, and natural resources. The Forest Service is using annual appropriations and supplemental funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act to target forest treatments in 21 landscape-scale areas with the greatest risk.
- a. If confirmed, will you commit to continuing the work of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy and utilizing all available resources –including IRA funds – to implement forest treatments in the most at-risk areas?

If confirmed, I will work with our state and local government partners to continue addressing the threat of catastrophic wildfires. The wildfires in Southern California are a devastating reminder of the threats we face and the need to protect our communities year-round. I will work to understand how we can reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health across the 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands.

17. **Research:** USDA’s Research, Education, and Economics mission area is home to accomplished scientists, researchers, statisticians, and economists.
- a. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting a strong budget that includes investments in USDA’s research agencies?

I do not want to get ahead of the President as he works to formulate a budget. However, if confirmed, I do commit to hearing from all interests of the Department as that budget is crafted.

- b. If confirmed, will you commit to not interfere with publications from the REE mission area, including reports from the National Agricultural Statistics Service and publications from the Economic Research Service?

If confirmed, I will work both to review past reports and make certain the Department utilizes strong data and adheres to the law.

- 18. **Research:** The Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research (FFAR) was established by Congress with bipartisan support in the 2014 Farm Bill. FFAR fosters public-private partnerships that support research initiatives aimed at tackling most pressing challenges facing our farmers.
 - a. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting FFAR and working to identify additional opportunities for public-private partnerships through FFAR?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research (FFAR), including its establishment, funding, body of work, ability to self-sustain, and overall impact on the farmers it purports to benefit.

- 19. **Farm Bill:** I appreciate your stated commitment during the hearing to work closely with and provide technical assistance to the Committee on a new Farm Bill, if you are confirmed. The Farm Bill is a complex piece of legislation with a broad, bipartisan coalition of farm and nutrition groups, as well as conservation, rural development, energy, and research groups and historically, this coalition is the strongest when all the groups stick together. Some have called for splitting the farm and nutrition portions of the Farm Bill. When the House of Representatives tried to split the Farm Bill in 2014, over 500 farm, food, conservation, nutrition, energy, and rural groups opposed and the strategy to split the Farm Bill ultimately failed. If confirmed, will you oppose efforts to split the Farm Bill?

If confirmed, I will take direction from the President, work with the Congress and the executive agencies to ensure programs that support farmers continue.

- 20. **Farm Programs:** The Texas Public Policy Foundation published a paper while you were running the organization calling for the elimination of a state loan program for farmers. Does your view reflect the view of this paper, that farmers would be better off without direct financial assistance from the government?

I did not author the specific piece at issue; and it is nearly a decade old. Over the past several months, I have learned about the importance of a strong farm safety net for farmers and ranchers across the country. If confirmed as Secretary, I plan to make decisions with their views in mind.

21. **Civil Rights:** I was pleased to hear during the hearing that you had read the Equity Commission Final Report.

- a. If confirmed, what steps will you take to ensure that farmers of color have full and fair access to all existing and future farm lending programs?

Americans deserve a government committed to serving every person with dignity and respect. As stated at my confirmation hearing, there is no room for racism at the Department, period.

- b. If confirmed, will you commit to protecting the civil rights of all USDA employees and program participants?

Yes.

22. **1890 Land-Grant Universities:** The 1890 land-grant universities serve a critical role in educating the next generation of agriculture professionals, conducting vital research, and supporting underserved and rural communities through cooperative extension. These 19 institutions have historically received bipartisan support and will continue to be a priority for members of our committee on both sides of the aisle. I want to be clear – these institutions are not a DEI initiative, and therefore, should not be harmed by administrative actions regarding DEI programs.

- a. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting the existing programs that serve the needs of 1890 land-grant universities?

I understand the importance of 1890 land-grant universities, including Prairie View A&M University in Texas, and the longstanding impact each has on the next generation of agriculture professionals. I am also aware that USDA has long partnered with the 1890 land-grant institutions through the National Scholars Program, which is aimed at supporting educational and career opportunities for students from rural or underserved communities across the country. If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about our land-grant university systems and their contributions to American agriculture.

- b. If confirmed, will you commit to continuing to support outreach efforts to 1890 land-grant institutions, including support for the current 1890 liaison positions?

- i. What about support for similar liaison positions, including those that serve Hispanic Serving Institutions?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about our land-grant university systems, interacting with the relevant stakeholders, and continuing this important conversation with Congress.

23. **Farm Programs:** Various federal budget proposals have included suggestions to cut farm programs or make crop insurance more expensive for farmers. Do you support proposals that would cut farm programs or crop insurance?

Over the last several months, I have learned about the importance of providing a strong farm safety net, including crop insurance, for farmers and ranchers across the country. If confirmed, I plan to work closely with budget officials to ensure a strong farm economy.

24. **Crop Insurance:** Farmers from across the country have regularly called the Federal crop insurance program the most important risk management tool and believe that it must be strengthened in the next Farm Bill. The Risk Management Agency and Federal Crop Insurance Corporation have undertaken critical work in recent years in expanding the available insurance options to more crops, producers, and regions of the country where options have been lacking, but holes and gaps still exist.

- a. If confirmed, will you commit to continuing this important work to expand insurance options and quality of coverage for producers for which options are lacking or insufficient?

While I have heard repeatedly about the importance of crop insurance, I have more to learn about where gaps may exist. If confirmed, I look forward to engaging with stakeholders across the country on ways that crop insurance could be strengthened.

- b. And if confirmed, will you commit to working with this Committee in a bipartisan way to maintain and strengthen this critical public-private partnership?

Over the last several months, I have learned about the importance of providing a strong farm safety net for farmers and ranchers across the country, particularly crop insurance. If confirmed, and along with the incredible leadership President Trump has recruited to the Farm Production and Conservation mission area, we will remain committed to working with the Committee as they work to strengthen the farm safety net.

25. **Specialty Crops:** USDA has announced significant funding to support specialty crop growers through the Marketing Assistance for Specialty Crops (MASC) program. The

enrollment period for this program resulted in over 50,000 growers applying, underscoring clear demand from the specialty crop industry. Initial payments have already been made, but USDA has not fully spent all of the previously announced investment. If confirmed, will you commit to ensuring the entirety of the remaining MASC funds are sent to eligible specialty crop growers as soon as possible?

Over the last several months, I have learned a lot about the important role specialty crops play regionally and throughout the United States.

While I'm not yet at the Department, my understanding is that, in recent weeks, USDA announced an additional \$650 million for the new Marketing Assistance for Specialty Crops (MASC) program, for a total of \$2.65 billion. If confirmed, I look forward to reviewing this program and its effectiveness thus far.

26. **Farm Programs:** The previous Administration published online dashboards providing regular public updates on the total amount and distribution of payments by state, commodity, and phase under the Emergency Relief Program (ERP) for 2020/2021 and 2022 losses.
- a. If confirmed, will you commit to maintaining public accessibility of those dashboards?

I am completely supportive of transparency and keeping the public informed, so long as it is done in a way to maintain the confidentiality of producer information. If confirmed, I will be glad to consult with USDA experts in the Farm Production and Conservation mission area about this topic and prior transparency exercises undertaken alongside the implementation of major assistance programs.

- b. And if confirmed, will you commit to publishing similar dashboards for: (1) the distribution of funding for economic and natural disaster assistance provided under the American Relief Act, 2025; and (2) any payments made to farmers using funding and discretionary authorities available through the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC)?

Again, if confirmed, I will be glad to consult with USDA experts in the Farm Production and Conservation mission area about this topic and prior transparency exercises undertaken alongside the implementation of major assistance programs.

27. **Outreach:** You have underscored your support for helping small family farms and underserved rural communities. Small farmers and limited-resource communities do not have the capacity to hire grant writers to apply for USDA programs.
- a. If confirmed, will you commit to consulting with Congress prior to any efforts to reduce the number of USDA staff focused on outreach?

Like you, I want to ensure small and family farms receive the best possible customer service from the Department. And as appropriate, I will work to inform Congress of actions that will impact small farms.

28. **OPPE:** The 2018 Farm Bill reauthorized the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE) to develop and maintain partnerships focused on the challenges facing rural and underserved communities like veteran and young farmers. OPPE's predecessor, the Office of Advocacy and Outreach was first established in 2008, showing the long-term interest of Congress in this mission. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting the work of OPPE, and its employees, as mandated and funded by Congress?

Public engagement has been a long-time passion of mine, and I will follow the law with respect to the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE)-related activities.

29. **Climate-Smart Commodities:** On January 22, USDA sent out notices to Partnership for Climate-Smart Commodities grantees notifying them that the Administration placed a temporary suspension on all actions related to grants, including Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities grants.
- a. If confirmed, will you commit to promptly providing to my staff a detailed explanation as to why and under what basis USDA has temporarily suspended all actions related to grant programs (including for Partnership of Climate-Smart Commodities grants), a complete list of programs affected by the temporary suspension, and when USDA expects to resume actions for each affected program?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about the Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities and providing information to you as appropriate and practicable.

30. **Conservation Reserve Program:** The Conservation Reserve Program is a successful voluntary conservation program that farmers use across the country. I led bipartisan legislation to expand this program that was included in the 2018 Farm Bill. If confirmed, will you commit to not making reductions to incentives or other changes to the detriment of the program and inform the Committee of any changes before they are finalized?

It's my understanding USDA's voluntary conservation programs, including the popular Conservation Reserve Program, help our farmers, ranchers, and forest owners, who are among the original conservationists, contribute to soil health and support a variety of our natural resources. I look forward to working with you and the rest of Congress on this program of mutual interest.

31. **Farm and Food Workers:** Farm and food workers have extremely hard and often dangerous jobs. What responsibility does USDA have to support our nation's farm and food workers?

I will work alongside the Department of Labor (DOL) Secretary-designate Chavez-DeRemer to support worker safety standards grounded in data.

32. **Organics:** The Organic Transition Initiative is an investment from USDA to support existing and transitioning organic farmers through a variety of programs. USDA has invested in the organic supply chain through the Organic Market Development Grant Program (OMDG) and in cooperative agreements to provide technical assistance and support for transitioning and existing organic farmers through the Transitioning to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP).

- a. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting existing grants and ongoing cooperative agreements?

I look forward to learning more about the variety of programs across USDA agencies that support organic producers, including the Organic Market Development Program and the Transition to Organic Partnership Program. If confirmed, I will be committed to serving all of American agriculture, including organic producers.

- b. Will you commit to supporting additional opportunities for transitioning and existing organic farmers?

I look forward to learning more about the variety of programs across USDA agencies that support organic producers, including the Organic Market Development Program and the Transition to Organic Partnership Program. If confirmed, I will be committed to serving all of American agriculture, including organic producers.

33. **Organics:** The Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP) supports organic farmers and handlers in securing or renewing their organic certification through USDA's National Organic Program. If confirmed, will you commit to ensuring adequate resources are available to fully support organic growers and handlers through OCCSP?

It is my understanding that funding for the Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP) may come from Congress. If confirmed, I look forward to working with Congress on OCCSP.

34. **Organics:** The integrity of the organic seal, overseen by the National Organic Program, relies on strong consumer confidence in the program's underlying organic standards. If confirmed, will you commit to ensuring organic standards continue to be regularly

updated through rulemaking in consultation with the National Organic Standards Board and industry partners?

The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) plays an important role in providing recommendations to the Department on organic standards. If confirmed, I look forward to working with the NOSB, industry partners, and Congress to maintain the integrity of the organic seal.

35. **International Food Aid:** The United States has long been a leader in the fight against global hunger. Minnesota farmers support critical programs like Food for Peace and McGovern-Dole Food for Education which for decades have helped American farmers feed hungry people and support fellow farmers around the world. These programs – and others at the USDA like Food for Progress and the Bill Emerson Humanitarian Trust – also serve to make our country safer by reducing hungry and improving literacy. Do you believe the USDA’s global food security programs and the USAID’s Food for Peace program are important to supporting American farmers?

For more than 70 years, commodities grown by America’s hard working farmers have been the centerpiece of USDA and the Agency for International Development (USAID) global food security programs. If confirmed, I look forward to further conversations with USAID and the Department’s Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs mission area.

- a. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting these programs and being a voice within the U.S. government to make sure these programs have the resources and staff necessary for implementing their programming?

I will be a voice for all of American agriculture. I will commit to reviewing the jurisdiction the Department holds, and where appropriate, engaging with USAID about American grown commodities.

36. **Energy:** Biofuels and the bioeconomy are an essential component of our national energy infrastructure, providing critical markets for our farmers and helping to secure America’s energy independence. USDA plays a vital role in supporting these markets, administering programs that provide economic assistance to build the bioenergy infrastructure, assisting in the implementation of the Renewable Fuel Standard, and promoting innovative technological applications through BioPreferred, among other initiatives. Right now, there are tremendous opportunities to expand these markets, but I am concerned that reports produced while you were leading the Texas Public Policy Foundation express a negative view of biofuels.

- a. How does your view of biofuels and the bioeconomy differ from the Texas Public Policy Foundation?

I did not author the piece at issue; and it is more than a decade old.

Over the last several months, I have learned about the importance of biofuels nationally to farmers and our fuel economy. Farmers deserve a strong advocate at the interagency table, especially when we have an opportunity to reduce our reliance on foreign fuels.

Therefore, if confirmed, I plan to be that representative and relay all farmers' views to Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator-designate Lee Zeldin.

As a reminder, President Trump has long been a fighter for our corn and soybean growers and biofuel producers. His January 20, 2025, Executive Order *Declaring a National Energy Emergency* directed EPA to consider emergency waivers for year-round E-15. Additionally, in 2019, President Trump granted a year-round sale of E-15.

- b. If confirmed, how will you leverage USDA programs to ensure that the bioeconomy continues to grow? How will you expand opportunities for our farmers to participate in and profit from bioenergy markets?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about USDA programs promoting a biobased economy.

- 37. **Energy/Rural Development:** The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provided a historic, one-time investment to improve and modernize rural America's energy infrastructure through programs like New ERA and PACE. These programs are focused on providing funds directly to our rural energy cooperatives in support of large-scale clean energy projects that will ultimately ensure the long-term sustainability of these cooperatives, and lower energy bills for rural Americans. Many of these projects are in the initial stages of securing USDA funding through New ERA and PACE, but recent guidance from the Administration suggests that obligations and disbursements for IRA projects may not move forward.
 - a. If confirmed, will you commit to ensuring that USDA fulfills the obligations that we have made to our rural cooperatives?

I appreciate the role that rural electric cooperatives have long played in electrifying rural America. I look forward to working with our rural electric cooperatives and learning more about the needs that currently exist (along with any obligations that have been made).

- b. If confirmed, will you ensure that the funds made available through these programs reach the rural communities they were intended to serve?

Again, before making any commitments to specific funding levels, I look forward to learning more about the programs. In general, I am supportive of and appreciate the role that rural electric cooperatives have long played in electrifying rural America.

38. **Rural Development:** The Rural Development (RD) mission area of USDA provides crucial support for healthcare, housing, utility infrastructure, economic development and many other essential projects in our rural communities. If confirmed, will you commit to ensuring that the President's budget requests provide the necessary funding for the many RD grant and loan programs that our rural communities need?

Exploring improvements to the Department's Rural Development programs remains a shared priority, and as I alluded to in my Senate confirmation hearing. If confirmed, I will work with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and relevant agencies to promote rural prosperity.

39. **Rural Development:** The Rural Partners Network and Rural.gov works to improve access to federal programs for rural county commissioners, mayors, and other rural leaders. Will you commit to continued operation of the Rural Partners Network and Rural.gov?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about the Rural Partners Network and Rural.gov as well as how it is serving rural communities.

40. **Food Safety:** Recent high-profile outbreaks of foodborne illnesses have strained consumer confidence in our food safety system. If confirmed, you will manage the Food Safety and Inspection Service, which oversees meat, poultry, and egg products. USDA shares federal responsibility for food safety regulations with the Food and Drug Administration.

- a. Will you commit to strong interagency coordination to support timely outbreak investigations and efforts to prevent foodborne illness outbreaks?

Yes, if confirmed I will have oversight of the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) which oversees meat, catfish, poultry and eggs. Strong interagency coordination across the White House Policy Councils, USDA FSIS, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and our state counterparts is critical to preserving public trust and also preventing and managing foodborne illness outbreaks.

- b. Additionally, will you commit to conducting full and thorough investigations into any foodborne illness outbreaks that occur directly under USDA's jurisdiction and notifying Congress and the public of the outcome of these investigations in a timely manner?

If confirmed, I will work closely with FSIS and Congress on identifying causes of future foodborne illness outbreaks.

41. **Animal Disease/Public Health and Transparency:** Since 2022, the ongoing outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) has had devastating effects on U.S. poultry producers, spread among dairy operations, and caused more than 60 infections in humans that resulted in at least one death. As discussed during your hearing, USDA plays a critical role in helping producers respond to disease outbreaks and ensuring the safety of our food. If confirmed, you will oversee several agencies that play a critical role in protecting public health and our agricultural economy, from meat inspection to monitoring and addressing threats posed by plant and animal diseases. I am deeply troubled by reports we are seeing about a freeze on *all* external communications and the cancellation of public health meetings from the Department of Health and Human Services, including things like public health alerts about emerging threats.

- a. Will you commit to continuing USDA’s strong record of transparency and communication with the public about avian influenza and any other threats posed to our health and the agricultural economy that you will be responsible for?

Yes. I will also work to ensure that USDA has a seat at the table with other federal agencies that engage on these issues.

42. **Animal Health/Vaccines:** In July 2024, USDA’s Center for Veterinary Biologics (CVB) announced its intent to begin accepting vaccine applications for the development of vaccines to be used in livestock against Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza or H5N1. Since that time, USDA has accepted several applications and is currently undergoing field trials for potential H5N1 vaccine candidates.

- a. Do you commit to continuing these vaccine trials and/or any other further research needed to find a safe and effective H5N1 vaccine for livestock?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about these efforts with my Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs—whom I hope can be considered and confirmed quickly—to utilize sound data in making any decisions about highly pathogenic avian influenza.

- b. If through CVB’s process an H5N1 vaccine is found to be safe and effective, do you commit to issuing the appropriate licenses and permits for that vaccine to be released?

If confirmed, and under those circumstances, I would look forward to reviewing the data, and then making decisions accordingly.

Senator Joni Ernst

1. Mrs. Rollins, U.S. biofuels play a central role in fulfilling President Trump’s vision for energy dominance, revitalizing the farm economy, and supporting bio-manufacturing jobs that can’t be moved overseas. If confirmed as the Secretary of Agriculture, you would be the leading voice in the Administration advocating for the interests of American farmers and working to fulfill the President’s vision of restoring economic prosperity to the nation’s heartland, growing key agriculture markets like corn and soybeans, while lowering gas prices across the country. How do you plan to advocate on behalf of the biofuel sector at the White House, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Department of the Treasury, and U.S. Department of Energy?

If confirmed, I would like for there to be a seat at the interagency table for farmers with the White House, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Department of Treasury, and Department of Energy (DOE) to work through ways to reduce our reliance on foreign fuels. As a reminder, President Trump has long been a fighter for our corn and soybean growers and biofuel producers. His January 20, 2025, Executive Order *Declaring a National Energy Emergency* directed the EPA to consider emergency waivers for year-round E-15. Also, in 2019, President Trump granted a year-round sale of E-15.

2. Mrs. Rollins, poultry producers in my state are being hit hard by the spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI). I applaud your commitment to making this outbreak a priority upon stepping into the role of Secretary of Agriculture. While also battling HPAI, our turkey producers have also been combating the spread of a separate disease—avian metapneumovirus (aMPV). Each week, rural Iowa is losing over \$422,000 in personal income and 2 million pounds of turkey products due to aMPV. USDA’s Center for Veterinary Biologics (CVB) did approve the use of a killed vaccine; however, it does not eradicate the disease, meaning it has little benefit to the turkey farmer. Instead, USDA’s CVB needs to approve the usage of a live vaccine and expedite the testing process to effectively combat aMPV. If confirmed, will you commit to working with me not only on enhancing mitigation efforts around HPAI, but also aMPV?

Yes. If confirmed, getting a handle on recent animal-disease outbreaks is among my top priorities. It is critical to protecting our domestic food security and reducing price volatility.

If confirmed, I look forward to requesting an immediate briefing on the Department’s highly pathogenic avian influenza response efforts to date.

3. Mrs. Rollins, last year, USDA sent a letter to 47 different states and territories regarding their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) integrity and administrative issues. An alarming item in many of these letters is the growing payment error rate, as shown by the quality control reporting process. Using data the USDA released late last year, the national overpayment rate in SNAP was 10.03% for fiscal year 2023. In total, these overpayments represent nearly \$1 billion per month in erroneous SNAP payments. At the current rate, an estimated \$91 billion in SNAP overpayments would be spent over

10 years due to poor state administration of the program. Again, these costs fall directly on the backs of the American taxpayer. In order to maintain bipartisan support for this important food safety net program, it is critical we hold states accountable as they do the groundwork of distributing benefits to hungry families. If confirmed, a part of your authority as Secretary is the ability to enforce liability payments against states with high error rates and require them to pay back a portion of their overpayments. Do you intend to use this authority and hold individual states accountable for their use of taxpayer dollars?

It is unacceptable that every day, more than \$30 million is lost due to erroneous overpayments. I commit to evaluating every tool in the Department's toolbox to address this avoidable and troubling trend.

Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith

1. In January 2024, the Department of Interior (DOI), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and U.S. Department of Agriculture announced the establishment of the U.S. One Health Coordination Unit (U.S. OHCU), and earlier this month the U.S. OHCU released the first-ever National One Health Framework to Address Zoonotic Diseases and Advance Public Health Preparedness in the United States, following congressional directives in the FY2023 Consolidated Appropriations Act and FY2021 House Appropriations Committee Report. This interagency collaboration is crucial for a robust, coordinated federal response to issues at the human-animal-environment interface—especially to high-consequence zoonotic diseases that originate in wildlife and can spread to people and livestock.

If confirmed, will you commit to continue USDA's involvement with the U.S. OHCU, and keep me apprised of how Congress can best support that involvement?

I look forward to learning more about the implementation of this Congressional directive. If confirmed, getting a handle on recent animal-disease outbreaks is among my top priorities.

2. America and China compete for global leadership in the emerging field of new breeding techniques for crops – a technological area that is key to America's future national and economic security. In addition to investing massively in its own research in this area, China also is actively working to steal American intellectual property through both illegal means, as well as utilizing its regulatory system for the approval of new ag-biotech products to force American developers to turn over highly proprietary information about these products in order to gain import approval. Indeed, China is making information demands that no other legitimate regulator in the world is demanding for these products, in an obvious attempt to gain access to information that will help its own domestic companies' competitive efforts in this space.

What can your Department do to pressure China to stop what is essentially forced tech transfer of U.S. crop gene editing technology to China under the guise of regulatory requirements? Should the United States consider placing an export control on certain U.S. gene-edited seed information? What efforts will the Department undertake to caution U.S. gene-edited seed developers against such Chinese practices?

Considerable progress was made on this front in the first Trump Administration, and I look forward to working with my colleagues across the federal government to make sure that those efforts are reinvigorated and that American intellectual property is protected (using all appropriate tools at our disposal).

3. The Coordinated Framework for regulation of ag-biotech products among USDA, EPA, and FDA is seriously broken and has defied efforts by multiple Administrations to fix it. While these problems as they pertain to genetically modified (GM) crops may just be too entrenched to ever resolve, the technological landscape is quickly moving beyond GM to gene-editing techniques that don't involve the insertion of any foreign DNA material into these plants. In essence, gene editing is just using nature's own tools to do what conventional breeding has done, albeit very slowly and very imprecisely, for thousands of years, to help select for the most advantageous natural traits – such as yield enhancement and drought and disease resistance. Important markets around the world are moving towards this realization, yet the U.S. regulatory system has yet to clarify that such products should be treated no differently than conventionally-bred crops. This lack of clarity is allowing EPA and FDA to assert questionable authority to regulate these products and is providing leverage to competitors like China to complicate market access for American developers. We need to fix this before we end up in the same terrible situation that we have faced with GM crops for the past several decades.

What will you do to ensure that USDA addresses this matter quickly?

I absolutely share your concerns. It is my understanding that the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California recently vacated USDA's May 2020 final rule for plants and microorganisms developed using genetic engineering. If confirmed, I look forward to hearing more on the status of this case before deciding on a course of action for USDA.

4. USDA's country-of-origin labeling (COOL) requirements for seafood took effect twenty years ago. Because COOL provides consumers with the ability to distinguish between domestic and imported seafood, American shrimpers, including those in Mississippi's commercial shrimp industry, have increasingly turned to retail sales to mitigate the harm caused by ever-increasing volumes of cheap, foreign, farm-raised shrimp. For this reason, the Agricultural Marketing Service's (AMS) enforcement of COOL is of the utmost importance to our domestic seafood producers.

However, AMS no longer appears to publish information regarding the agency's enforcement efforts regarding COOL. This lack of public data stands in marked contrast

to the large amount of enforcement information published by AMS regarding compliance with organic standards.

If confirmed, will you prioritize the enforcement of COOL requirements for seafood and provide me with information regarding the compliance efforts that have been undertaken by AMS over the last few years?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about the seafood industry and its history with the Agricultural Marketing Service on these issues.

5. When Secretary Vilsack appeared before the Agriculture Committee four years ago for his confirmation, I asked him about this issue. The United States simply cannot meet our own demand for phosphate, an important ingredient in fertilizer, with domestic production. I agree with the President that tariffs are an important part of putting America first, but no one can deny that the current duties on phosphate mean that our farmers have to purchase inputs at prices higher than other farmers around the world yet can only receive world market prices for their production.

How concerned are you about ensuring adequate supply of these fertilizers, and ensuring competitive, reliable markets for this critical ag input for farmers? Will you commit to ensuring that the Secretary of Commerce and the U.S. Trade Representative understand the long-term impacts on fertilizer supplies and their impact on U.S. agricultural competitiveness?

I am very concerned about our nation's ability to provide inputs to cultivate our food supply. I commit to better understanding this issue, including reviewing any programming the Biden-Harris Administration initiated, such as the utility of Fertilizer Production Expansion Program.

6. As you know, the Federal crop insurance program is a cornerstone of the farm safety net with 2.36 million policies sold covering over 540 million acres. This risk management tool not only enables farmers and ranchers to rebuild after weather and market adversity, but it also helps America's agricultural producers secure much needed capital for their operations.

If confirmed, will you work to 1) ensure this program continues to be successful, 2) maintain and strengthen the critical partnership between the USDA and the private-sector that successfully delivers this popular program to our nation's farmers, and 3) work with industry and producers to find ways to improve the program without jeopardizing its actuarial soundness?

Yes.

7. USDA plays a critical role in working across the federal government as a voice for farmers across America. This includes providing agronomic data and information to other

agencies who may not have the opportunity to engage with rural communities on a regular basis.

As USDA Secretary, how do you plan to collaborate with the EPA and other agencies to help ensure that the needs of farmers, such as the necessity and benefits of safe and effective pesticide products, are well recognized, and that USDA has an equal partnership in supporting science-based, risk-benefit decision making?

Farmers want access to scientifically sound, affordable crop protection tools to keep our food supply abundant. Crop protection tool registrations fall under Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator-designate Zeldin’s purview. However, if confirmed, I will ensure EPA is aware of both USDA and farmers’ views on these matters.

8. The Department of Labor calculates the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR) for H-2A workers using the annual average hourly gross wage reported in the USDA Farm Labor Survey (FLS). However, the FLS includes all wages paid to farmworkers, including AEWR-based wages paid to H-2A workers, as well as bonuses, incentive pay, and overtime. This methodology results in a self-inflating minimum wage cycle based on the previous year’s gross wage, causing volatile and unsustainable wage increases that threaten the viability of family farms.

The USDA has the authority to adjust the FLS methodology to reduce artificial wage inflation by collecting data on the “base wage” only, excluding bonuses, incentive pay, piece rate pay, and overtime from the survey data. Since the AEWR was originally intended as a minimum wage for agricultural work, this adjustment would provide a more accurate reflection of baseline agricultural wages.

As Secretary, will you direct the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) to make the necessary adjustments to the FLS to prevent continued artificial increases in the AEWR? Additionally, will you commit to dedicating resources to the development and implementation of an alternative survey for the DOL to use in establishing the AEWR?

It is my understanding there is historical context with respect to the first Trump Administration acting on the Adverse Effect Wage Rate. If confirmed, while I would like to review past actions, I am more broadly committed to working with Department of Labor (DOL) Secretary-designate Chavez-DeRemer to ensure our legal immigration programs better support agriculture.

9. Emerging technologies in agriculture, such as gene editing and precision agriculture, are reshaping the future of farming. However, other countries are increasingly influencing global regulatory standards and driving innovation at a pace that could put U.S. leadership at risk.

What is your plan to ensure that U.S. farmers and companies can innovate and compete on a level playing field, free from undue restrictions or external pressures that could stifle progress domestically?

I look forward to working with USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and Biotechnology Regulatory Services to help approve and unleash safe, affordable, and modernized biotechnologies so that U.S. agriculture may thrive. This would be consistent with policies previously pursued by USDA under the first Trump Administration. I look forward to learning about ways the Department can advance precision agriculture as well, if confirmed.

10. Under the Biden Administration, USDA APHIS effectively ceded authority in a March 8, 2024, Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for Animal Welfare Act (AWA) enforcement to the Department of Justice (DOJ). Under such a framework, lawyers who have not hidden their animal rights sympathies would be guiding policy instead of APHIS veterinarians and animal health experts. DOJ should have and always has had a role in supporting AWA enforcement activities, but by law that enforcement responsibility ultimately lies with the Secretary of Agriculture.

If confirmed, will your USDA assert itself as the primary AWA enforcement authority?

Thank you for flagging this recent MOU. If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about it from leadership within the Marketing and Regulatory Programs mission area.

11. Some have suggested that merging USDA and FDA food safety responsibilities into a single agency would improve public health in the U.S., and President Trump proposed such a merge in his last administration. For many reasons, including the fact that most of FDA's attention is focused on drugs rather than food, experts generally consider USDA's food safety processes and enforcement activities far superior to FDA's.

Do you foresee the President issuing such a proposal again?

I have not discussed this matter with the President.

12. The Phase One deal with China established a protocol for China to resume imports of U.S. poultry following a highly pathogenic avian influenza outbreak. There are currently 42 states, including Mississippi, that should have been able to resume export to China following mutually agreed-upon decontamination measures to ensure to avoid any spread of HPAI. These states cannot because China is simply ignoring their commitment, so U.S. chicken is essentially locked out of the U.S. market. I brought this to the attention of the previous administration who seemed unwilling to engage with China on this. My state and so many others cannot afford to continue to lose income due to an inability to export chicken to China.

Will you commit to working with the U.S. Trade Representative and other appropriate agencies to ensure that China is adhering to its commitments with respect to chicken under the Phase One deal?

If confirmed, I will make certain all relevant agencies, including the office of the USTR, know just how important American agriculture is to every trade conversation, including those with China.

13. Stakeholders in Mississippi are concerned that FSIS' current *Salmonella* in poultry proposal is very likely to increase food costs and food waste without scientific justification for the assertion that it will improve food safety.

If confirmed, would you be open to alternative approaches that would actually protect public health and could be immediately deployed by the agency?

If confirmed, I will ensure the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) rulemakings pay appropriate attention to all relevant information—especially sound data.

14. Numerous policies have been enacted over the last two decades that have resulted in increased demand for renewable diesel and sustainable aviation fuel, including the renewable fuel standard and the 45Z Clean Fuel Production Credit. Advanced biofuels are produced from biomass feedstock, the main sources of which are soybean oil, used cooking oil, and animal fats. As demand for advanced biofuel increases, prices for some of the more finite feedstocks, like animal fats, are also increasing, creating higher costs in some food production supply chains, like in the pet food industry. However, there is no government subsidization of animal fats like there is for other feedstocks.

While there are many clean energy sources available for transportation, there are limited options for feeding people and pets. Animal fats are not waste streams, as some have described. They are critical inputs for pet food. The Trump administration will have an opportunity to shape how these policies are implemented, deciding which feedstocks can sustainably supply this growing industry.

Will you commit to working with the Department of the Treasury and the Environmental Protection Agency to ensure biofuel policies balance the growing demand with the need to maintain affordable prices for consumers?

I absolutely commit to making sure that USDA has a seat at the table and will advocate on behalf of the agricultural community.

15. Former Secretary Tom Vilsack recently announced the USDA's Interim Rule for Climate-Smart Agriculture Crops Used as Biofuel Feedstocks. My colleagues have

already identified several changes that need to be made by the Trump administration and Congress to improve this. Particularly, we need to ensure the U.S. farmer is put at the front of the line instead of favoring imported feedstocks and that opportunities are created for other U.S. feedstocks besides the three commodities listed in the USDA's interim rule. In addition to addressing climate, we need to leverage the power of U.S. consumers and enhance national security through self-reliance for crops beyond the biofuels space, such as cotton.

Will you endeavor to be responsive to Congress and work within your authority to expand these opportunities so that we can create more structural demand for U.S. agriculture in a broad-based manner?

If confirmed, I am happy to discuss changes that you and your colleagues have identified, and I commit to conferring with Congress on this issue.

16. The cotton industry is critically important to the Mississippi economy. Since our domestic textile industry has largely moved away to avoid overreaching regulations, we are now forced to export almost ninety percent of the cotton grown in the United States. However, our ability to export is being frustrated because Brazil surpassed the U.S. in both cotton production and exports in the last year, and we are becoming less competitive every day in the global marketplace. Not only has Brazil developed production systems and technologies to increase yield, which far surpasses our yield levels, they move their products into the marketplace much more quickly than we can.

Will you commit to do everything within your authority to help restore the global competitiveness of the U.S. cotton industry?

Absolutely. And, as a native Texan, I understand the importance of the U.S. cotton industry and ensuring it is globally competitive.

17. Managing risks in agriculture is more difficult today than ever. USDA is responsible for managing and disseminating information that risk managers and market participants depend on. This is a responsibility that should be approached very seriously. In recent years, there have been numerous examples of reductions in data gathering to support the agency's analysis and changes made in reporting requirements that have failed to the point they had to be retracted, creating havoc in our markets.

Will you do everything in your power to improve the dependability and integrity of data managed by USDA to support agricultural risk management and marketing?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about this issue pertaining to data gathering and related reporting.

18. Last January, USDA proposed a rule (RIN 0570-AB05, Fed.Reg. 2024-00981, Docket No. RBS-22-BUSINESS-0004-0001) to merge the Guidelines for Designating Biobased

Products for Federal Procurement and the Voluntary Labeling Program for Biobased Products into one regulation, the Biobased Markets (BioPreferred) Program. USDA should take this opportunity to follow the directives given by Congress in the 2018 Farm Bill and incorporate language ensuring that international standards used by third parties based on the mass balance approach are recognized by USDA in determining qualification for the BioPreferred Program.

If confirmed, will you work with me to incorporate the use of mass balance accounting into the BioPreferred Program?

If confirmed, I will work with USDA Rural Development departmental experts, who administer the program, to gain a better understanding of the issue at hand.

Senator Jerry Moran

1. Although dairy is an export-reliant commodity, many U.S. dairy processors import finished goods, critical ingredients, inputs to manufacturing and equipment and would therefore be negatively impacted by tariffs. Of greater concern are the potential retaliatory tariffs placed on U.S. dairy exports, which reached almost \$8 billion last year. And yet, tariffs may provide an avenue for jump-starting negotiations with key trading partners.

How would you make sure agricultural stakeholders are not left behind or unnecessarily impacted by proposed tariff strategies? Will you take stakeholder input on any negotiations that result from tariff actions and how will you ensure agricultural stakeholders get a voice in those discussions?

If confirmed, I look forward to reviewing all of the tools the Department has at its disposal to help American agriculture thrive in the face of complex trade dynamics. In doing so, I will remain open and accessible to stakeholder input and will also review their input regarding past programs. President Trump negotiated over 50 agreements during his first term. I look forward to working with him on more agreements and on eliminating the \$45.5 B currently projected agricultural trade deficit.

Senator Michael F. Bennet

If confirmed, you will oversee the implementation of the Farm Bill. The Farm Bill authorizes and funds many conservation programs important to Western agriculture, including the Regional Conservation Partnership Program and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. A robust Conservation Title in the Farm Bill provides voluntary incentives and certainty to family farmers who face extreme weather, pathogens, and an increasingly volatile global marketplace.

1. Ms. Rollins, how will you work with this Congress to pass a Farm Bill with a strong Conservation Title that cuts red tape, improves access to these programs, and promotes the durability of Western agriculture?

A five-year farm bill, one that could provide certainty to rural communities, has been delayed by more than two years. As Congress works to reauthorize the bill, I pledge the whole of the Department to provide comprehensive technical assistance, including to Title II—Conservation. As for the tenets of the title, I trust both the House and the Senate to find consensus on the best ways to mitigate burdens for some of our original conservationists—farmers.

2. What USDA flexibilities and resources will you use to maximize conservation programs' effectiveness?

USDA has a wide range of conservation programs. If confirmed, I plan to work closely with departmental experts to learn more about what already works well and what can be improved across these conservation programs.

Some have suggested that important programs in the conservation title like the Conservation Reserve Program should be eliminated, or that USDA should be prohibited from working with farmers to create new permanent easements.

3. Ms. Rollins, do you agree with these proposals?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning from Departmental experts about USDA's many popular voluntary, locally-led, and incentive based conservation programs and how they are additive to farming practices.

4. Why or why not?

It's my preliminary understanding USDA's voluntary conservation programs help our farmers, ranchers, and forest owners, who are among the original conservationists, contribute to soil health, and support a variety of our natural resources.

5. As you know the American West is facing catastrophic long-term drought. Texas and Colorado are on the front lines. I've worked with my colleagues across the aisle on numerous policies to better address drought at USDA through voluntary conservation programs at the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

5. What are your plans to address the nuanced drought concerns in the West?

It's my understanding over 40 million people across seven states and over 30 Tribes rely on water from the Colorado River. If confirmed, I look forward to reviewing the effectiveness of dollars USDA spent in recent years and discussing those findings with you, to address drought in the West.

6. Will you commit to working with me to address some of these drought challenges ahead of the Farm Bill?

If confirmed, I will gladly commit to working with you and the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry to provide technical assistance on these and related matters when it comes to the farm bill drafting process.

Texas, like Colorado, is a large state. One of my greatest concerns is the federal government turning its back on rural America. During the previous Trump administration, we saw local Farm Service Agency, NRCS, and Rural Development offices close their doors across Colorado and the country. Since then, many offices have re-opened but continue to face severe staffing shortages.

7. How will you support local USDA offices and keep them fully staffed so USDA continues working for the agricultural and rural communities that they support?

If confirmed, and especially within the local Farm Service Agency offices and Rural Development mission area, I will be dedicated to ensuring our farmers and rancher customers are receiving first-rate customer service.

Last fall, the Forest Service announced they would not hire any temporary, seasonal, non-firefighting staff to address the agency's budget shortfall. Colorado communities are concerned that without seasonal staff, the Forest Service will be unable to accomplish mission-critical work like wildfire prevention and mitigation and managing outdoor recreation. Most of Colorado's front range has been identified by the Forest Service as a high-priority fireshed that needs funding to help reduce fire risk. These services keep Colorado communities safe and their economies running.

8. How will you address the Forest Service budget shortfall?

If confirmed, I look forward to digging into the budget at the U.S. Forest Service. Fiscal solvency is a bedrock business principle, and I will work with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as the Administration approaches the FY 2026 budget. I will keep your office informed.

9. How will you rebuild the agency to prioritize this critical boots-on-the-ground work?

At the heart of the U.S. Forest Service's mission is serving people and caring for the land. I look forward to evaluating their workforce needs and ensuring we have a workforce equipped to execute and work at the ground level.

There are at least seven Congressionally-established definitions of rural for USDA Rural Development programs. In addition to creating confusion for potential applicants, some definitions do a huge disservice to highly rural areas. Colorado has many communities with populations far lower than established population thresholds for certain programs. For example, it's reasonable to assume that the resources to provide competitive applications are much different for a town of 500 than for a town of 50,000.

10. What specific ways can we work together to cut bureaucratic red tape for rural America and better serve our most highly rural areas?

If confirmed, Senator, I really look forward to working with you on these issues. Exploring improvements to the Department's Rural Development programs remains a top priority of mine.

Rural electric cooperatives across the country are uniquely positioned to drive economic opportunity for rural America. As non-profit entities, the co-op model is specifically designed to prioritize the needs of their members and the rural communities they serve. In Colorado, co-ops deliver power to over 70% of our state. They reach all four corners and serve nearly 1.5 million people. Our co-ops are leading the nation and setting a standard for the rest of the country and the world. Since the 1930s, USDA has assisted these co-ops, first through the Rural Electric Administration, and now through the Rural Utilities Service. This support continues to be a lifeline for rural communities, helping them strengthen and modernize their infrastructure and meet growing energy demand reliably and affordably.

11. How will USDA continue to support these rural electric cooperatives that are so important to meeting our growing energy demand and providing economic opportunities to rural America?

Thank you for the background. If confirmed, I look forward to reviewing further the history of rural electric cooperatives and their unique relationship with USDA Rural Development's Rural Utility Service. It is my understanding that rural electric cooperatives power over 56 percent of the nation's landscape and serve over

90 percent of persistent poverty counties. They can play a big role in both the President's energy independence and rural prosperity agendas.

Finding affordable housing in Western mountain communities can be very challenging. Chairman John Boozman and I were able to pass the Flexible Partnership Act as a part of the 2018 Farm Bill. Senator Steve Daines and I led the effort last Congress and it passed as part of the EXPLORE Act. This bill authorizes the Forest Service to lease unused administrative sites to support local affordable housing and infrastructure needs. Despite strong interest from many counties, cities, and towns in Colorado, the Forest Service is pursuing a small number of projects under this new authority and only one contract has been signed in Colorado. I am concerned with the pace and scale of implementation.

12. Can you assure me the Forest Service will prioritize this authority to help address the dire need for housing in our rural communities?

I am aware of the housing affordability crisis. I have heard from Members on both sides of the aisle that we have more work to do to ensure our communities, especially Gateway communities, have adequate, available, and affordable housing opportunities. If confirmed, I look forward to receiving a briefing by the Forest Service on this issue.

13. Will you provide my office with a list of all the administrative sites in Colorado that would be eligible to use this new authority?

If confirmed, I will work with the Forest Service to inventory administrative sites that can benefit from expanded authorities.

As you may know, the report of the National Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission is the product of a two-year, congressionally-chartered nonpartisan group of 50 experts, including a number of Coloradans, that came together to offer 148 consensus recommendations for urgent new approaches to the wildfire crisis, more collaboration, more proactive action, increased use of beneficial fire, workforce improvements, modernizing decision-making tools, and investing in resilience. While Congress continues to work on implementing the recommendations that require a change in law, there are many good recommendations that the Administration can execute.

14. Will you commit to receiving a nonpartisan briefing on the commission and its report as you get up to speed?

Yes. I look forward to reading the commission report and learning more about the recommendations they put forward.

I continue to hear from Colorado producers about labor hardships. The Adverse Effect Wage Rates (AEWR) are set to increase by over 4% nationally in 2025; however, lowering the AEWR isn't a silver bullet solution. Our entire immigration system is broken and our agriculture sector acutely feels the pains of the costs, the burdensome paperwork, and the fears of ICE raids. I worked with colleagues across the aisle to craft a thoughtful measure to reform the H-2A Ag Labor program.

15. Will you work with me, other departments, and folks in the agriculture industry to fix the program once and for all?

It's my understanding there is historical context with respect to the first Trump Administration acting on the Adverse Effect Wage Rate. If confirmed, while I would like to review past actions, I am more broadly committed to working with Congress and Department of Labor (DOL) Secretary-designate Chavez-DeRemer to ensure our legal immigration programs better support agriculture.

Currently, SNAP benefits may be used to purchase most food and drink products except for alcohol and prepared foods. As a program that is intended to supplement food budgets, SNAP recipients need more choices to meet their dietary needs. While most Americans do not eat according to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, research indicates that SNAP and non-SNAP households have similar food purchase patterns.

16. To provide additional healthy food choices to SNAP beneficiaries, I plan to reintroduce my bill, the Hot Foods Act, to allow purchases of hot foods such as rotisserie chicken or hot soup. Do you support proposals such as this that improve nutritional choices for SNAP beneficiaries consistent with the food purchases of most Americans?

As mentioned in my confirmation hearing, I have a deep concern with the rates of diet-related, chronic disease in children, including obesity. I look forward to evaluating data on nutritional choices in existing programs as well as existing programs' legal authorities related to nutrition.

Access to basic needs like healthy food is essential for individuals and families to thrive, both personally and professionally. Programs like SNAP provide this critical foundation. In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress strengthened the SNAP Employment & Training program by expanding opportunities for paid work-based learning, pre-apprenticeship, and apprenticeship programs.

However, an unintended consequence occurred; now, individuals earning a paid wage during their federal work program (like SNAP E&T) are becoming ineligible for SNAP benefits. A prerequisite to being eligible for SNAP E&T is to be on SNAP; thus, people have to choose between food security and job training.

17. Will you work with me to ensure that individuals participating in paid work-based training programs can continue to receive SNAP benefits and access to healthy food?

One of the great things about SNAP is the built-in programs that encourage work and self-sufficiency. Work and job training is a core component of the SNAP program and I am committed to working with anyone who will come to the table on those issues, like the one identified here, to find the best solutions to maximize opportunities for individuals to receive the support and training they need to be successful.

Senator Tina Smith

1. As you know, the United States has trust and treaty obligations to 574 Tribal nations in the United States, including 11 Dakota and Ojibwe nations in Minnesota. Every part of the Federal government, including the USDA, has a responsibility to uphold these government-to-government relationships with Tribes and to uphold treaty obligations to Tribal members. There is considerable room for improvement, particularly in the reforms to self-governance. This is an area of bipartisan interest.
 - a. If confirmed, are you committed to upholding USDA's responsibilities and obligations toward Tribal Nations?

Like you, I agree that we need to ensure USDA's responsibilities to and/or programs impacting our tribes work much better. If confirmed, I will look forward to working on these matters closely with the Office of Tribal Relations, in the Office of the Secretary at USDA.

- b. How can we work together to improve the USDA's relationships with and policies toward Tribal Nations?

I look forward to working with Congress as appropriate to ensure current programs are responsive to Tribal Nations' needs.

2. Today, our rural communities are confronting profound change. More than a third of farm and ranch land in the United States is expected to change hands in the next 20 years.

Simply put, without new farmers taking over and building new agricultural businesses, we will lose farms and land that is essential to our rural and urban communities and food security.

At the same time, I have met with many young people eager to build new agricultural ventures, and just last summer we heard in this committee from a beginning farmer, Tessa Parks, who has confronted numerous obstacles as she and her spouse Wyatt raise grass-finished beef in Rice County, Minnesota, which they sell direct-to-consumer at farmers markets.

Tessa said it best “I believe we can build a brighter future together through necessary improvements to the farm safety net, by building fairer and more competitive markets, and by creating better opportunities for the next generation of farmers.

- a. What specific actions will you take, as Secretary of Agriculture, to ensure that beginning farmers, including Native farmers, Hmong farmers and Latino farmers are able to thrive?

If confirmed, I look forward to exploring ways to improve the USDA Beginning Farmers and Ranchers programs and others designed to lift up all beginning farmers. This is a particularly important effort, given the average age of today’s farmer is 58 and only 9 percent of all producers are under the age of 35. This is also important, given the number of farms in the U.S. declined by 141,733, or 7%, in the last U.S. Census of Agriculture.

- b. What are the biggest obstacles that you see beginning farmers confronting as they build their businesses across the country?

Barriers to entry for beginning farmers and ranchers include lack of access to capital, high input costs, overregulation, and in recent history, generally low commodity prices.

3. Nearly ninety years ago, with the help of the federal Rural Electrification Act, neighbors came together to help farms and rural families in America to turn the lights on by forming rural electric cooperatives. Thanks to this work, 50 coops in Minnesota today provide electric service to nearly one third of the state.

But in the ninety years since, 2022 was the first year we again made big investments in our rural energy systems. Congress created the New Empowering Rural America (New ERA) program through the Inflation Reduction Act, which helps reduce energy costs and pollution for people in rural communities. USDA estimates that co-ops participating in

this program will save their members up to eight hundred dollars per rural household each year.

In Minnesota, and in communities across the country, rural electric coops are using assistance from New ERA to diversify their energy sources while lowering costs for businesses and families. We must protect these investments so our rural communities can thrive. If confirmed, will you commit to upholding USDA's investments in our rural communities through the New ERA program?

If confirmed, I intend to learn more about USDA Rural Development, Rural Utility Service programs, including the new New ERA program, their current status, and whether they have been additive to U.S. energy dominance.

4. For years, the USDA has been investing in farmers and rural small business through a relatively small but important Farm Bill program, the Rural Energy for America Program, or REAP. REAP is popular and has long had bipartisan support. For example, investments to help farms and rural small businesses in Minnesota this past year will save people thousands of dollars every year and create enough energy savings to power more than 15,000 homes. In this way, these investments will help farmers and business owners save money and improve their bottom lines while reducing harmful carbon emissions. If confirmed, will you commit to continuing support for our farmers and rural small businesses through USDA's REAP program?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about USDA Rural Development programs, including the Rural Energy for America Program, from departmental experts.

5. It's no secret that one of the biggest factors causing rising input costs is the lack of options farmers face when looking to buy their inputs, including fertilizer and seeds. And on the processing and marketing side of farming it is the same thing. There are fewer and fewer options for farmers to send their animals to be processed and their goods to be marketed. Ag industry consolidation has resulted in farmers receiving just 14.9 cents of every food dollar that consumers pay. Costs like marketing, processing, transportation, and others now account for nearly 85 cents of every food dollar spent in the United States. Producers, especially beginning farmers, are getting squeezed on both ends of farming, from inputs to harvest to marketing. What is your plan as Secretary to help farmers facing rampant consolidation across the ag sector?

Current market conditions are especially difficult for farmers. If confirmed, I look forward to evaluating all available legal authorities and programs to ensure our farmers are competitive and receive appropriate support to succeed.

6. The 2018 Farm Bill created the Dairy Margin Coverage (DMC) program. Dairy producers have generally been happy with this program. I believe that the DMC worked because Congress and the USDA laid out a plan after we passed the last Farm Bill to promote the new program and to really make sure it worked. The framework laid out by Sen. Stabenow last year made smart updates to the DMC that I, along with Ranking Member Klobuchar and Sen. Baldwin pushed for. Despite the DMC being a much more effective risk management tool than its predecessor programs, we continue to see the number of dairy farms in states like Minnesota decline. The Farm Service Agency has announced the enrollment period for 2025 DMC coverage from January 29 until March 31st of this year.
 - a. Can you speak to the importance of the DMC, and how it has helped farmers weather market fluctuations?

Consistent with your observation above, it is my understanding that, after years of improvement, dairy producers are generally pleased with the Dairy Margin Coverage (DMC).

- b. What improvements do you think this Committee should be considering to improve the DMC?

I have much to learn about DMC, and I'm hopeful that this is a topic we can discuss in the weeks and months to come as Congress works to reauthorize the farm bill.

- c. Will you commit to ensuring that the DMC is working well for all dairy farmers, and ensure USDA conducts a robust outreach effort to ensure dairy farmers are enrolling in this important risk management tool?

If confirmed, I commit to working with Congress to ensure DMC is working well for dairy farmers. As for outreach, I commit to raising this issue with the team at the Farm Production and Conservation mission area and discuss ways to make sure producers are aware of the options available to them.

Senator Richard J. Durbin

Mass Deportations

1. During the hearing, I asked about your work with the America First Policy Institute, where on multiple occasions, you had expressed support for conducting “the largest deportation exercise in history” at a “scale that actually matters.” During the hearing, I referred to undocumented workers, but your think tank also issued policy papers that criticized the temporary foreign worker visa programs as putting pressure on wages of vulnerable Americans and straining public services.

As I indicated, in Illinois, I hear from pork producers, meat packers, apple orchards, dairy operations, that they cannot find local workers for these jobs, and in these instances, they are using workers with legal temporary visas, or other legal visas, like those authorized by the U.S. Mexico Canada Trade Agreement, among other types of official authorizations approved by the U.S. government.

Should farmers expect federal agents to appear unannounced to search their private property for workers who are legally authorized?

Your question asks about authorities that belong to the Secretary of Homeland Security and other agencies. As a private citizen, I am not aware of their enforcement priorities.

If the focus, as was stated, is on “criminals first,” then, what should the food and agriculture sector expect to be the second focus and third focus?

Your question asks about authorities that belong to the Secretary of Homeland Security and other agencies. As a private citizen, I am not aware of their enforcement priorities.

2. Recently, the Trump Administration instructed federal employees to report co-workers who do not adhere to the new administration policies on diversity, equity, and inclusion. There are about 2,124 FSA county offices, a highly localized federal presence in nearly every rural county in America whose expertise is to have their eyes and ears on local farming and ranching.

Should farmers anticipate that USDA employees in FSA County Offices will be instructed to examine, investigate, and report on farmers in their service area whom they believe are employing foreign workers, including authorized workers?

If confirmed, my focus will be ensuring our farmer and rancher customers are receiving first-rate customer service with respect to how USDA is implementing the dozens of programs within the Food Production and Conservation mission area, especially on the local FSA level.

USDA Payments—Nutrition and Farms

3. I understand you have made comments over the years supporting work requirements for SNAP recipients.

Do you believe that the current SNAP program, the nutrition safety-net, encourages long-term reliance on government payments?

As I mentioned to Senator Smith during my confirmation hearing, my commitment is to ensure I have the data, the research, and a thorough understanding of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). That includes learning more about the churn and/or longevity that exists in the program, and how the Department can work to support both working families and those looking to enter the labor market.

Do you support replacing the SNAP formula with state block grants?

At this time my priority is to better understand the program as it operates, including how the states administer it. As I have said, I want to preserve the program for those in need while respecting the generosity of the American taxpayer funding it.

4. Farmers tell me they prefer to get their revenues from the market. USDA farm payments have existed since the 1930s.

Do you believe the USDA farm safety-net encourages long-term reliance on government payments?

No. Over the last 30 years, the farm safety net has become considerably more market-oriented and risk-based. The farmers and ranchers I've met over the course of my life make decisions based on things like the market, the equipment they own, local weather conditions at the time of planting, and maintaining crop rotations—not the availability of government support.

Do you support replacing the farm safety-net formula with state block grants?

As I've learned throughout my preparation for the confirmation process, the farm safety net is designed to be flexible and to respond to market and weather conditions. I look forward to reviewing this issue if confirmed.

5. Some believe that work requirements, and asset tests, as done with SNAP, should be extended as eligibility requirements for all USDA safety-net programs, such as an enforced verification of actively-engaged, majority contributions to the farm operation, or caps on the total assets owned.

If confirmed, how will you approach the enforcement of farm program eligibility requirements?

I will enforce the law as written.

School Nutrition

6. During the first Trump Administration, USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue, within the first six days of taking office, worked to reverse Obama Administration efforts to improve school meals, like reducing sodium and increasing fruits and vegetables. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., the current nominee for Secretary of Health and Human Services, has proposed to improve nutrition in school meals.

What changed?

Should we both be confirmed, I will welcome input from Secretary-designate Kennedy on policies related to school meals.

Nutrition Program – Women Infants and Children (WIC)

7. The USDA Women, Infants, and Children Program helps to improve the health of low-income pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children under the age of five who are at nutritional risk.

Do you agree that this program is critically important for children?

I appreciate the value of the Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) to pregnant and postpartum mothers and their children. I look forward to a comprehensive review of the program, including how the Department can work to ensure the healthy behaviors accumulated through use of WIC translate to families who transition to other programs, including SNAP.

Can I receive a commitment from you that full funding of this program is key for WIC to carry out its goals?

I do not want to get ahead of the President as he works to formulate a budget. However, I do commit to representing all interests of the Department as that budget is crafted.

Conservation Funds

8. Consumers, both globally and domestically, want to buy more products from farmers who increase key practices, such as conservation tillage, economical fertilizer management, and cover crops. This is understood by major agricultural businesses like Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, Bunge, and others, and companies like Kraft Heinz, Kellanova, and Mondelez. Typically, regardless of policies, the consumer is the ultimate decider, and American farmers who prepare now, who stay ahead of this curve, will be the supplier of first choice, and at a major international business competitive advantage in the long run, compared to foreign competitors like Brazil, Argentina, Ukraine, and Canada. One example is the new market for sustainable aviation fuels made from crops. Most believe these new value-added market opportunities for farmers will offer revenue

premiums above conventional crops, and can serve as a critical attribute when expanding into new export markets to reduce the agricultural trade deficit.

These farming practices also help with dust storms. Illinois has experienced severe dust storms; eight people lost their lives in a highway accident in 2023. These farming practices also help farmers to experiment with the most effective and economical applications of high-cost fertilizer.

USDA conservation dollars are voluntary incentives that help American farmers afford, prepare for, remain competitive, and find new revenue opportunities, in these new markets, that also can address dust storms and avoid costly fertilizer losses.

What are your plans for USDA conservation dollars?

I appreciate the voluntary nature of our nation’s conservation programs, but I look forward to learning more about them. While any decisions left to the discretion of the Secretary will necessarily have to wait until I’ve had a chance to meet with my new team, I’m aware that Congress was prescriptive in many respects in directing how the funding is to be used for various programs. I look forward to digging into all of this if confirmed.

Assistance to Clothing Manufacturers

9. A clothing manufacturer in my state, Oxxford Clothing, produces high-end, tailored business wear and employs more than 120 highly specialized workers. Since 2014, USDA has administered the Wool Apparel Trust Fund and the Pima Cotton Trust Fund to provide payments to these American suit and shirt manufacturers to preserve domestic apparel and textile manufacturing. These industries that use cotton and wool fibers, yarns and fabrics have received support from USDA from these funds to assist with maintaining jobs. Should funding lapse from these funds, the risk is significant that these American jobs soon would be lost and relocated to foreign countries.

If confirmed, will you commit to support this industry by working to avoid any lapse in funding for these USDA programs this year?

If confirmed, I look forward to discussing available options with experts at the Department. At the same time, I recognize the importance of a five-year farm bill and the associated certainty.

Food Waste

10. More than 30 percent of food in our nation goes unsold or uneaten every year, and a large part of that waste ends up in landfills. Food loss and waste costs the U.S. economy more than \$470 billion. Last Congress, Senator Grassley and I introduced the *Reduce Food Loss and Waste Act*, which would have created a voluntary certification program at

USDA to incentivize food businesses to save millions of dollars of wasted inventory by donating more food or using an alternative disposal method, such as composting. This proposal was supported by groups like the National Restaurant Association, Consumer Brands Association, FMI-the Food Industry Association, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic.

If confirmed, will you commit to having USDA assist with the development of this food waste reduction proposal?

I appreciate the efforts of Senator Grassley and you to address food waste and look forward to learning more about your proposal and more about the work of the Department to address food loss and waste. I also think there is room at the table for other agencies to participate, so if confirmed, I look forward to a broader conversation.

Senator Cory Booker

1. I was very encouraged by your commitment to helping this nation's small farmers. One of the most egregious ways small farmers are not being served is through our disaster relief and crop insurance safety nets, which often work well for large, commodity-crop farms, but poorly or not at all for small, multi-crop farms.
 - a. Can you work with my office and other Senators from small farm states to make sure that small farmers are able to apply with minimal burdens for the emergency aid that was recently passed by Congress?

Yes.

- b. Can you work with my office and other Senators from small / specialty crop states to understand and implement solutions to make sure crop insurance is useful and accessible to small, multi-crop farms?

As I noted in the hearing, I am committed to ensuring the farm safety net works for farms of all sizes, both large and small and all sizes in between.

- c. There is a serious lack of transparency with how crop insurance is functioning. Will you work with my office to request data from crop insurance companies, so we can better understand how crop insurance is being delivered to farmers?

Before committing to collecting additional data, I need to first evaluate the data the Risk Management Agency (RMA) already has at its disposal. Regardless, I look forward to working with you to ensure that crop insurance is working for your producers.

2. The U.S. government is the largest purchaser of food in America. Instead of leveraging these food purchasing dollars to support independent farmers and ranchers and local food systems, the majority of these taxpayer funds are directed to the world's largest and most abusive food corporations. Given the urgency of the viability crisis that small ranch operations face, I was disheartened by comments made by former USDA Secretary, Tom Vilsack, where he essentially said the USDA had no other choice than to buy meat from Brazilian-owned JBS. Will you commit to finding ways to leverage the Department's purchasing to better assist independent family farmers and ranchers?

While I have more to learn on this topic, I will commit to working with you as we seek the best ways to leverage limited taxpayer funding in helping those most in need.

3. Corporate consolidation in agriculture has had devastating consequences for farmers, rural communities, and consumers. Four companies now control 85% of the beef processing market, 82% of the nitrogen fertilizer market, and 62% of the global agrichemical market. This consolidation drives down prices paid to farmers, reduces competition that helps consumers, and leaves our food system vulnerable to supply chain disruptions. If confirmed as the next Secretary of Agriculture, will you commit to prioritizing the fight against corporate consolidation by using USDA's existing authority to enforce antitrust laws?

While I will be exploring any and all options for helping agricultural producers and consumers navigate the massive increase in costs they've experienced over the last few years, I'm also mindful that the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) enjoy primary responsibility for the enforcement of our antitrust laws.

4. As I've traveled across the country I have heard directly from farmers and ranchers about the challenges they face in dealing with large meatpackers and processors. Many of these farmers and ranchers have shared how critical the recently finalized rulemakings under the Packers & Stockyards Act are for them to be able to stay in business. These rules are essential to ensuring fair competition and protecting farmers and ranchers from discriminatory, deceptive, and retaliatory practices by dominant agribusiness corporations. The past administration has finalized three rules, one of which is Poultry Grower Payment Systems and Capital Improvement Systems. These rules would provide much-needed transparency, give producers stronger tools to hold corporations accountable, and help restore balance in a market that has become increasingly tilted against independent producers.
 - a. If confirmed as Secretary, will you oppose any attempts to undermine these final rules?

I cannot commit to supporting or opposing rules that I have not yet had the opportunity to review, but I will commit to engaging with Congress as appropriate.

- b. And, will you commit to keeping my staff briefed on the status of these rules after you take office?

Yes.

5. President Trump set a precedent for connecting hungry Americans directly to farmers through his Farmers to Families Food Box program during the COVID pandemic. Modeled after this program, the USDA subsequently created the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) Cooperative Agreement program, which provides funding for states to purchase foods from local producers to support food banks. Both farmers and food banks have expressed how beneficial this program has been, in both supporting agriculture and bringing healthy, fresh options to needy people. Will you commit to continuing this program?

The Farmers to Families Food Box was instrumental in connecting those in need with staple foods. I appreciate that program being used as a model for the Local Food Purchasing Program and look forward to learning more about it, including making certain that if it continues, it provides resources to all communities, even the most rural of our great nation.

6. WIC provides nutritious foods, breastfeeding support, nutrition education, and health care referrals to low-income pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and young children at nutritional risk. WIC has been shown to reduce the risk of fetal death and infant mortality, and improve children's health outcomes even after they age out of the program. However, WIC has not kept up with the pace of technology changes in service delivery, making it more burdensome for participants. In recent years, Congress provided temporary authority for WIC to serve families through virtual platforms, putting WIC on par with other health care providers. USDA has also funded states to pilot online shopping, making it easier for busy and rural families to access the program's healthy foods. If confirmed, will you support giving WIC families permanent access to virtual services, and expanding access to online shopping?

The Department's 16 nutrition programs will face a comprehensive review from my team, ensuring not only that they meet the needs of the families they serve, but respect the generosity of the American taxpayer funding them. I commit to better understanding the virtual services you mention and also reviewing online shopping for both the Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

7. I have long been a proponent of bringing much needed reforms to commodity checkoff programs. Checkoffs are essentially taxes that farmers, ranchers, and producers must pay when they sell their products. In total, nearly \$1 billion dollars per year are collected by government checkoffs. By federal law, checkoff dollars are not to be used for lobbying, but these lines have been blurred by lack of appropriate safeguards over the program. I am co-leading checkoff reform legislation with Senator Mike Lee. As Secretary, will you work to bring transparency and accountability to USDA checkoff programs?

I've heard a number of opinions on the commodity checkoff programs—including wide-ranging support from the agricultural community—but I'm committed to learning more about them and engaging in dialogue with Congress on the topic.

8. Significant political attention has been focused on the national security risks of adversarial foreign farmland ownership, but this has not addressed the wider problem of foreign interests that are behind corporate land purchases. Further, land is increasingly being bought up by hedge funds and other corporate investors like Bill Gates as assets, which drives up prices for farmers.
 - a. Do you commit to USDA collecting more data on the size and ownership of farmland owned by large corporations, both domestic and foreign?

Before committing to collecting additional data, I need to first evaluate the data USDA already has at its disposal.

- b. What measures do you propose to strengthen USDA's implementation and enforcement of the Agricultural Foreign Investment Disclosure Act?

I'm aware that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently completed a review of USDA's implementation of the Agricultural Foreign Investment Disclosure Act (AFIDA), and I will start by reviewing those recommendations. If confirmed, I look forward to continuing discussions with Congress on this topic.

9. Tens of thousands of Americans have had their SNAP benefits stolen due to EBT skimming. These victims are suffering from organized criminal activity targeting their benefits. While the theft started in a few states, it has now spread nationwide, with California, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, New York, and Texas particularly impacted. In 2024, Congress voted on a bipartisan basis to provide temporary funding to help states restore stolen SNAP benefits, but those funds and protections expired at the end of 2024. Do you support continued assistance to states to help these crime victims and restore their stolen SNAP benefits?

I have learned that the majority of this theft stems from transnational criminal rings, and it is so maddening that they continue to target the most vulnerable among us. While states can—without delay—reimburse families, I will commit to ongoing

conversations with Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNCS) to ensure states, retailers, processors, and all involved across the Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) system, are being held accountable to preventing instances of theft. I will also partner with other agencies seeing similar theft, like the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) via Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and local and federal law enforcement who have been tracking these breaches, to ensure a whole of government approach to protecting our families.

Senator Ben Ray Luján

1. Will you commit to opposing any proposed cuts to the National School Lunch Program?

As I mentioned at my confirmation hearing, children are suffering from diet-related chronic disease at unheard of rates. School lunch is an important part of that conversation, because we should all want it to be the best meal eaten, not just the best meal served. So if confirmed, I commit to better understanding our child nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

2. Do I have your support for my Acequia Act and to not reverse any actions regarding acequias that were implemented under the previous administration?

If confirmed, I will gladly review the legislation.

3. In the Ag industry, there are twice as many open positions as there are qualified applicants. How do you envision elevating youth development programs, such as 4-H, FFA and other youth-based agriculture programs as an asset to fill the ag talent pipeline; and what steps will you take to ensure these programs receive the resources necessary to prepare young people for careers in agriculture?

As I noted in my confirmation hearing, I am a product of both 4-H and Future Farmers of America (FFA) and look forward to bringing attention to the youth development programs if I'm fortunate enough to be confirmed. As for 4-H, I look forward to working with Congress as you all consider funding needs. With respect to FFA, I look forward to working with my dear friend Linda McMahon at the Department of Education.

4. If confirmed, how do you plan to maintain and expand the support that has been provided these past four years to farmers and ranchers experiencing extreme drought conditions?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about the various programs at USDA that provide assistance to drought-stricken producers, ranging from crop insurance to the Livestock Forage Program (LFP). I also look forward to working with my

Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation—once confirmed—to implement the recently passed natural disaster assistance as quickly as possible. As for expansion, I look forward to providing technical assistance to Congress as you all consider changes to the farm bill.

5. Would you support keeping that exemption for Western States in place until we are able to come to a long-term solution?

If confirmed, I look forward to having a follow-up discussion on this matter.

6. Are you willing to work with me to continue looking into ways that risk management programs can help drought-stricken areas, especially in the Southwest?

I am always willing to listen and work with any office to find solutions that work for all involved. If confirmed, I look forward to our continued conversations.

Senator Reverend Raphael Warnock

1. The Federal Crop Insurance Program (FCIP) is a critical part of the farmer safety net that helps protect farmers from the financial consequences of adverse growing and market conditions.¹ In Georgia, federal crop insurance plans like the Hurricane Insurance Protection-Wind Index (HIP-WI) have been important lifelines for producers recovering from Hurricanes Helene² and Debby,³ which caused significant damage to agricultural operations across Georgia. However, I have heard from farmers in my state that the Risk Management Agency's indemnity payment process for HIP-WI, which relies solely on data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA),⁴ has left some producers out when local data shows they should have received indemnity payments for hurricanes in 2024.
 - a. If confirmed, how will you work to maintain and strengthen FCIP's vital public-private partnerships to help ensure that all of Georgia's farmers have access to our nation's farmer safety net?

¹ Stephanie Rosch, *Farm Bill Primer: Federal Crop Insurance Program*, Congressional Research Service (Aug. 26, 2022), <https://www.crs.gov/reports/pdf/IF12201/IF12201.pdf>.

² Richard Flournoy, *Product Management Bulletin-PM-24-067 Hurricane Insurance Protection - Wind Index (HIP-WI) Payment Indicator and Trigger Event Date for Helene 2024*, Risk Management Agency (Oct. 11, 2024), <https://www.rma.usda.gov/policy-procedure/bulletins-memos/product-management-bulletin/2024/pm-24-067-hurricane-insurance>.

³ *USDA Makes Indemnity Payments to Producers Impacted by Hurricane Debby*, Risk Management Agency (Aug. 23, 2024), <https://www.rma.usda.gov/news-events/news/2024/washington-dc/usda-makes-indemnity-payments-producers-impacted-hurricane>.

⁴ *Hurricane Insurance Protection - Wind Index (HIP-WI)*, Risk Management Agency (Jan. 2025), <https://www.rma.usda.gov/about-crop-insurance/highlighted-initiatives-plans/hurricane-insurance-protection-wind-index>.

I’ve heard from multiple Senators—and from farmers and ranchers across the country—that crop insurance is the cornerstone of the farm safety net. I look forward to working with you and your colleagues on issues related to crop insurance and risk management for our nation’s agricultural producers.

- b. If confirmed, will you commit to working with Congress, NOAA, and RMA to improve HIP-WI’s indemnity payment process so that HIP-WI better meets the needs of our farmers in the wake of hurricanes?

I am not familiar with the details of the Hurricane Insurance Protection-Wind Index, but I look forward to working with all stakeholders to meet the needs of farmers in the wake of hurricanes.

2. With over 4,000 slaughter and meatpacking workers in 2023, Georgia is a top state for meat processing jobs.⁵ Meat processing workers are the backbone of our nation’s meat processing facilities. However, I am concerned that meat processing workers are exposed to several risks that can lead to injury and illness, including harmful biological agents, hazardous chemicals, dangerous equipment, and high noise levels.⁶ These workers suffer serious injuries at double the rate of other workers⁷ and are particularly susceptible to musculoskeletal disorders.⁸ We must ensure that the health and safety of hard-working Georgians and the integrity of our nation’s food supply remain a top priority.
 - a. If confirmed, will you commit to working with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to uphold strong worker health and safety standards while maintaining food safety within our nation’s meat processing industry?

Yes.

3. The H-2A Temporary Agricultural Workers program helps farmers across the country meet their labor needs as domestic farm labor continues to become scarcer.⁹ Farmers in Georgia continue to be top employers of H-2A workers to meet their seasonal needs.¹⁰

⁵ *Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2023*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (May 2023), <https://www.bls.gov/oes/2023/may/oes513023.htm>.

⁶ *Meatpacking*, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Jan. 2025), <https://www.osha.gov/meatpacking>.

⁷ *US Department of Labor Releases New Inspection Guidance to Protect Workers in Animal Slaughtering, Processing Industries*, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Oct. 16, 2024), <https://www.osha.gov/news/newsreleases/osha-trade-release/20241016>.

⁸ Scott Ketcham, *Inspection Guidance for Animal Slaughtering and Processing Establishments*, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Oct. 15, 2024), <https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/standardinterpretations/2024-10-15>.

⁹ *See Farm Labor*, Economic Research Service (Jan. 8, 2025), <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-labor#h2a>.

¹⁰ *Id.* (Chart entitled “U.S. H-2A (temporary agricultural employment of foreign workers) positions certified by State, fiscal years 2005–23”).

However, some producers, including controlled environmental agricultural operators, are unable to use this essential program to meet their year-round labor needs.

- a. If confirmed, will you commit to working with Congress and the Department of Labor to reform the H-2A program to better support the needs of year-round agricultural operations like controlled environment agriculture operations?

I understand that labor is very important to production agriculture, and I look forward to working with Congress, DOL Secretary-Designate Chavez-DeRemer, and stakeholders on related issues.

4. From our state's famous peaches to our high-quality pecans and our sweet Vidalia onions, Georgia's specialty crop farmers produce a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, and nuts. One of the prominent, unique challenges that specialty crop producers in my state face is the import dumping of cheap, foreign-grown fruits and vegetables during the U.S. growing season that outcompete domestic specialty crops and harm domestic growers. I am glad that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) have already appointed members to their newly established Seasonal and Perishable Agricultural Products Advisory Committee to address this issue, and I am hopeful that this effort will remain top of mind throughout the next administration.

- a. If confirmed, will you commit to continuing this vital partnership between USDA and USTR to address the unique issues facing domestic specialty crop growers, including the seasonal dumping of foreign-grown fruit and vegetable imports?

I look forward to working with you and my colleagues at the United States Trade Representative (USTR) on any issues of unfair foreign competition facing domestic agricultural producers, particularly specialty crop growers with concerns about seasonal dumping.

- b. Will you seriously consider any recommendations of the Seasonal and Perishable Agricultural Products Advisory Committee to protect and better support the needs of our nation's specialty crop producers?

Yes.

- c. If confirmed, will you work with me and my colleagues, to put effective trade measures in place to help curb these growing import levels and keep our domestic specialty crop farmers in business?

While I have much to learn about this topic before committing to taking specific actions, I commit to working with you on this issue.

5. Since its creation in 1933, the Secretary of Agriculture has used the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) to promote economic stability in the agricultural industry. I am glad

previous secretaries have used the CCC to expand markets for specialty crops and fight hunger at home through The Emergency Food Assistance Program¹¹ and abroad¹² while supporting our farmers.

- a. If confirmed, will you advocate for preserving the Secretary of Agriculture’s current authorities to utilize the CCC to help both farmers and families?

I commit to additional dialogue with Congress as I learn more about the scope of the Commodity Credit Corporation’s authorities.

6. Agriculture is the top industry in Georgia. Yet over 1.4 million Georgians are facing hunger, and 461,720 of them are children.¹³ The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is one of our nation’s effective anti-hunger programs, which served nearly 1.4 million Georgians in 2023.¹⁴ SNAP has been found to reduce poverty, improve health outcomes, and increase food security.¹⁵ I am concerned that proposals to weaken SNAP and limit the dignity of choice within this program will hinder its effectiveness, especially for families in rural communities who may already have limited access to grocery stores and affordable fruits and vegetables.

- a. If confirmed, how will you ensure that SNAP participants who may already have limited access to grocery stores, affordable fruits, and vegetables will not be harmed by efforts to restrict SNAP choice?

As mentioned in my confirmation hearing, I will undertake a comprehensive review of all nutrition programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), to better understand their reach, administration, and impact, including impacts on healthy behaviors and outcomes for families.

7. Georgia is the number one forestry state in the nation with over 21.4 million acres of private timberland.¹⁶ Georgia’s forestry industry contributed \$42 billion in revenue and

¹¹ Melissa Abelev and David Tuckwiller, *Fiscal Year 2025 Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) Funding*, Food and Nutrition Service (Dec. 2, 2024), <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/FY25-CCC-TEFAP-Funding.pdf>.

¹² *USDA, USAID Deploy \$1 Billion for Emergency Food Assistance*, Foreign Agriculture Service (Apr. 18, 2024), <https://www.fas.usda.gov/newsroom/usda-usaid-deploy-1-billion-emergency-food-assistance>.

¹³ *What Hunger Looks Like in Georgia*, Feeding America (Jan. 2025), <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/georgia>.

¹⁴ Ife Finch Floyd, *The Basics of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in Georgia*, Georgia Budget & Policy Institute (Nov. 2, 2023), <https://gbpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/20231103-The-Basics-of-SNAP.pdf>.

¹⁵ Brynne Keith-Jennings, Joseph Llobrera, and Stacy Dean, *Links of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program with Food Insecurity, Poverty, and Health: Evidence and Potential*, National Library of Medicine (Dec. 2019), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6836787>.

¹⁶ *#1 Forestry State*, Georgia Forestry Association (Jan. 2025), <https://gfagrow.org/about/numberone>; *Georgia Forest Inventory & Analysis, 2018-2022*, Georgia Forestry Commission (Jul. 23, 2024), <https://gatrees.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Georgia-Forest-Inventory-Analysis-2018-2022.pdf>.

140,787 jobs to my state in Fiscal Year 2024, making massive contributions to Georgia's economy and especially our rural communities.¹⁷ Maintaining and growing the vitality of Georgia's forestry sector is one of my priorities, and I am hopeful that the next administration will work with this Committee to tackle the domestic forest industry's most pressing issues.

- a. If confirmed, how will you promote family forest owners' access to the technical and financial resources needed to maintain their lands and participate in emerging markets?

Family forest owners play a pivotal role in our nation's natural resource economy. We must strengthen our existing markets and create new markets for domestic forest products. If confirmed, I will evaluate the Department's authorities as they relate to forest owners' access to markets and additional revenue streams.

- b. How do you plan to align USDA programs to expand access to voluntary, market-driven solutions that support forest health and provide new revenue opportunities for family forest owners?

If confirmed, I will work across mission areas to ensure family forest owners have access to voluntary, market-driven opportunities. I will commit to learning more about the barriers to existing markets and working with Members of Congress, as appropriate, to ensure we are strengthening existing markets and building out new markets for American forests and forest products.

- c. How will you work to expand traditional farm loan programs to better meet the needs of forest landowners and improve their access to affordable financing?

If confirmed, I commit to learning more about the financial challenges private forest owners face across the nation and how we can ensure private forest owners have access to the capital they need to continue growing one of America's greatest renewable resources.

- d. How will you promote federal-private partnerships to improve wildfire resilience and mitigation on private lands?

¹⁷ *State and Private Forestry Fact Sheet: Georgia 2024*, U.S. Forest Service (Dec. 13, 2024), https://apps.fs.usda.gov/nicportal/temppdf/sfs/naweb/ga_std.pdf.

If confirmed, I will work with the Forest Service and our state and local partners related to our investments in wildfire risk reduction to protect our communities and natural resources.

- e. How will you help ensure the Forest Service considers the forestry management needs of all regions of the United States, which may differ, without negatively affecting the domestic forestry industry and private forest owners in the Southeast?

If confirmed, I will work to understand the market dynamics and regional forces impacting forest owners across the nation. With 193 million acres of Forest Service land, it is clear a one-size fits all approach to land management will not work. I look forward to working with Congress and our local units to identify how we can continue actively managing our forests and supporting the rural economies that depend on these vital natural resources.

8. Georgia is home to Fort Valley State University, an 1890s Institution that plays a vital role in advancing my state's agriculture industry through education, research, and outreach.¹⁸ Congress has authorized annual capacity grants for 1890 Institutions that require one-to-one nonfederal matching funds.¹⁹ However, I am concerned that these critical institutions are not getting their fair share of funding.
 - a. If confirmed, will you commit to working with Congress to continue to close the gaps in funding for all 19 of our 1890 Institutions?

If confirmed, I commit to continue this important conversation with Congress.

9. The Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) provides funding for state, tribal and territorial governments to purchase foods to help support local, regional, and underserved producers to improve agricultural supply chain resiliency while feeding local communities.²⁰ In Georgia, the Georgia Department of Agriculture is using \$23.6 million in LFPA funding to purchase agricultural products from socially disadvantaged farmers and distribute these products to Georgia's eight regional food banks.²¹

¹⁸ *FVSU Is a Land-Grant Institution*, Fort Valley State University (Feb. 28, 2024), <https://www.fvsu.edu/about-fvsu/fvsu-land-grant-institution>.

¹⁹ Genevieve Croft, *1890 Land-Grant Universities: Background and Selected Issues*, Congressional Research Service (Jun. 9, 2021), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11847/2>.

²⁰ *Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program*, Agricultural Marketing Service (Jan. 2025), <https://www.ams.usda.gov/selling-food-to-usda/lfpacap>.

²¹ *Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) in Georgia*, Georgia Department of Agriculture (Jul. 28, 2023), <https://www.agr.georgia.gov/news/local-food-purchase-assistance-lfpa-georgia>.

- a. If confirmed, will you commit to continuing this program or a similar effort to strengthen local food supply chains and food security?

If confirmed, I commit to reviewing the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program’s impact and ensure any of USDA’s programs are effective in providing resources to local communities.

10. Georgia is the top poultry production state in the nation with the “Poultry Capital of the World” in Gainesville, Georgia. The poultry industry employs over 88,000 hardworking Georgians and has an economic impact of more than \$28 billion annually.²² Growers in my state have long been concerned about the nationwide outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), which had its first confirmed case in Georgia last week.²³ HPAI is a serious threat to the livelihoods of thousands of hardworking Georgians and the health of Georgia’s thriving poultry industry that must be addressed urgently.
 - a. If confirmed, how will you work with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, state Departments of Agriculture, and Congress to mitigate any further spread of HPAI and minimize HPAI’s negative effects on the domestic poultry industry?

I have been following the news about the first confirmed case in commercial poultry in Georgia just last week.

Eradicating and preventing animal disease remains a top priority, as mentioned in my hearing testimony. If confirmed, I look forward to requesting an immediate briefing on the Department’s highly pathogenic avian influenza response efforts to date.

Robust coordination, not just on the federal level, but on the state level—with state departments of agriculture, state veterinarians and local officials who are on the frontlines—is paramount to eradicating and preventing further spread of diseases, like highly pathogenic avian influenza.

Will you commit to advocating for sufficient funding to ensure USDA has the necessary resources to research and address animal diseases like HPAI that threaten the integrity and security of our nation’s food supply chain?

²² Margaret Lawrence, *Georgia Extension Supporting County Governments and Poultry Industry*, National Institute of Food and Agriculture (Sep. 15, 2022), <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/about-nifa/blogs/georgia-extension-supporting-county-governments-poultry-industry>.

²³ Tyler Harper, *Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Confirmed in Commercial Poultry Flock in Georgia, All Poultry Activities in Georgia Suspended*, Georgia Department of Agriculture (Jan. 17, 2025), <https://agr.georgia.gov/pr/highly-pathogenic-avian-influenza-confirmed-commercial-poultry-flock-georgia-all-poultry>.

Yes, and if confirmed, I look forward to working with Congress to ensure USDA programs are well equipped to fight animal diseases like highly pathogenic avian influenza.

11. USDA's Office of Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OSCAR) leads efforts to facilitate the fair and equitable treatment of USDA customers and employees and enforce civil rights initiatives.²⁴ On January 21, 2025, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report on USDA's efforts to address internal workplace discrimination complaints. Within this report, GAO made three recommendations for the Secretary of Agriculture to take to improve OSCAR's effectiveness and strengthen USDA's response to internal discrimination complaints.²⁵
- a. If confirmed, will you commit to reading GAO's report entitled this report and take seriously the recommendations of this report?

Yes, if confirmed, and thank you for bringing this report to my attention.

- b. How will you work with OSCAR to respond to GAO's recommendations within this report?

It would be premature to respond with an answer, given I am not confirmed and have not yet read the report.

12. In addition to the \$21 billion in natural disaster recovery funding, last year, Congress provided \$10 billion to help farmers stay afloat through widespread economic hardship. Like the natural disaster funding, it is critical that USDA work swiftly to distribute this economic assistance funding to growers as they prepare for the 2025 crop year.
- a. If confirmed, how will you work to ensure this economic assistance is distributed both swiftly and equitably?

As stated during my hearing, deploying the more than \$30 billion in economic and natural disaster assistance recently authorized by Congress as quickly and effectively as possible (including by the 90-day deadline for economic assistance) is a chief priority.

13. Georgia is the nation's leading peanut producer, growing more than 50 percent of the United States' peanuts in 2022.²⁶ Peanut farmers in my state are concerned about trade barriers between the United States and the European Union regarding aflatoxins, which

²⁴ *Office of Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights*, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Jan. 2025), <https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/general-information/staff-offices/office-assistant-secretary-civil-rights>.

²⁵ *Equal Employment Opportunity: USDA Could Strengthen Efforts to Address Workplace Discrimination Complaints*, Government Accountability Office (Jan. 21, 2025), <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-25-105804>.

²⁶ Maria Bukowski and Aaron Ates, *Georgia Leads U.S. Production of Peanuts, Outproducing All Other States Combined*, *Economic Research Service* (Mar. 29, 2023), <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/charts-of-note/chart-detail?chartId=106192>.

peanuts are naturally susceptible to. Domestic growers have long partnered with USDA to ensure that their harvest is safe; however, they have also faced difficulty meeting the European Union's rigorous testing requirements for aflatoxin, which have limited producer's access to foreign markets.

- a. If confirmed, will you commit to working with the USTR to negotiate an effective solution to this ongoing non-tariff trade barrier with your E.U. counterparts?

I will commit to learning more about this issue, including working with USTR. Market access is so extremely important, and I will make certain American agriculture always has a seat at the table.

- b. Will you keep me and my colleagues updated on your progress with addressing this issue?

I am always willing to remain in touch with concerned offices, and I look forward to it.

- c. If confirmed, will you commit to submitting requests for sufficient funding for research to the White House Office of Management and Budget during the annual appropriations process to ensure USDA has the necessary resources to research and address aflatoxin?

I will make certain this and many other issues are part of my conversations with the Department's Office of Budget and Program Analysis.

14. Approximately 30 million children in the United States are eligible to receive free or reduced-price school meals.²⁷ However, when schools close for the summer, many families and children lose access to these regular meals. Summer EBT, or SUN Bucks, is a new summer feeding program that works to close the summer meal gap by providing families with \$120 per school-aged child to buy groceries during the summer months.²⁸ While I am encouraged that the majority of states have chosen to participate in SUN Bucks, I am hopeful more states will choose to participate in this critical anti-hunger program.

- a. If confirmed, what steps will you take to support the expansion and effectiveness of the Food and Nutrition Service's (FNS) summer feeding programs like SUN Bucks to ensure that *all* our nation's students, including those who live in rural areas, do not go hungry when school is on break?

²⁷ Zoë Neuberger and Katie Bergh, *Permanent Summer Grocery Benefits Are a Big Win for Children in Low-Income Families, Despite Disappointing Tradeoffs*, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (Dec. 20, 2022), <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/permanent-summer-grocery-benefits-are-a-big-win-for-children-in-low-income-families-despite>.

²⁸ *SUN Bucks (Summer EBT)*, Food and Nutrition Service (Jan. 2025), <https://www.fns.usda.gov/summer/sunbucks>.

As mentioned above, and if confirmed, I will be embarking on a review of all nutrition programs under the jurisdiction of the Department, including Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT). I strongly believe in states' ability to serve their communities, so my team and I will also spend time learning from those who have chosen to implement as well as those who have chosen other pathways.

- b. Will you commit to working with FNS and states to assess and address any implementation or administrative barriers that may hinder state participation in SUN Bucks?

As mentioned above, if confirmed, my team and I will review all nutrition programs, including Summer EBT. That review will include administrative or implementation barriers, as well as discussion with states who chose more local, regionalized approaches to serving families in need, in lieu of federal programs like Summer EBT.

- 15. As a long-standing anti-hunger advocate, I am also concerned that 343 million people around the world are facing hunger.²⁹ Georgia is home to MANA, one of our nation's two manufacturers of ready-to-use therapeutic foods (RUTF), which is used to treat the most extreme forms of hunger. This product also supports peanut farmers in my state who grow the main ingredient of RUTF, peanuts.
 - a. If confirmed, how will you work to scale-up RUTF procurement and distribution?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about ready-to-use therapeutic foods (RUTF), the companies who manufacture it, and its benefits to children facing malnourishment across the globe. This understanding will certainly be influenced by conversations with your team, the Agency for International Development (USAID), and relevant stakeholders.

- 16. On January 20, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Orders on “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing”³⁰ and “Initial Rescission of Harmful Executive Orders and Action.”³¹ To comply with these orders, federal agencies, including USDA, announced that they would place diversity, equity, and inclusion workers on leave.

²⁹ *A Global Food Crisis*, World Food Programme (Jan. 2025), <https://www.wfp.org/global-hunger-crisis>.

³⁰ *Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing*, The White House (Jan. 20, 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing>.

³¹ *Initial Rescission of Harmful Executive Orders and Action*, The White House (Jan. 20, 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/initial-rescissions-of-harmful-executive-orders-and-actions>.

- a. How many USDA employees have been placed on leave as a result of these actions?

Until confirmed, I do not have access to this information.

- b. Which USDA departments and/or offices have been affected as a result of these actions?

Until confirmed, I do not have access to this information.

17. I successfully fought to include \$5.2 billion in critical funding for our nation’s farmers in Sections 22006 and 22007 of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). Section 22006 provided \$3.1 billion for economically distressed farm loan borrowers to keep our farmers and ranchers afloat. Thanks to this program over \$87 million in funding has gone directly to 1,279 farm loan borrowers in Georgia, so they can keep farming.³² I am concerned that President Trump’s Executive Order entitled “Unleashing American Energy” may pause the rollout of these obligated funds for economically distressed borrowers.³³

- a. If confirmed, will you commit to ensuring that USDA completes the swift distribution of all Section 22006 IRA funds so that our nation’s producers get the financial relief they need to keep farming?

Unleashing American energy production is so incredibly important to President Trump and myself. If confirmed, I commit to learning more about Section 22006, including past disbursements, and will look forward to continued conversations with your team.

18. During your testimony, you affirmed your commitment to work with the Agriculture Committees to pass a Farm Bill.³⁴ As you know, Congress has used the Farm Bill reauthorization process to stand up new programs and improve existing ones, including initiatives that are aimed at supporting specific groups like the 2501 Program for underserved farmers, which Congress created in the 1990 Farm Bill and expanded in the 2014 Farm Bill. The 2501 Program works to ensure that underserved and veteran farmers can equitably participate in USDA programs.³⁵ As Secretary of Agriculture, you would be responsible for carrying out this program as Congress intended.

- a. If confirmed, will you commit to implementing *all* programs as Congress has directed and intended?

³² *Keeping Farmers Farming: Biden-Harris Administration Assistance for Distressed Farm Loan Borrowers*, Farm Service Agency (Jan. 2025), <https://www.farmers.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fsa-22006-impacts-report.pdf>.

³³ *Unleashing American Energy*, The White House (Jan. 20, 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/unleashing-american-energy>.

³⁴ Brooke Rollins, *Rollins Confirmation Statement* (Jan. 22, 2025), https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/9034b53a-0a87-e8d1-842e-6821551fc940/Testimony_Rollins_01.23.2025.pdf.

³⁵ *Underserved and Veteran Farmers, Ranchers, and Foresters*, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Jan. 2025), <https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/general-information/staff-offices/office-partnerships-and-public-engagement/underserved-and-veteran-farmers-ranchers-and-foresters>.

If confirmed, I will follow the law.

Senator Peter Welch

1. Late last year, I was very disappointed that the year-end spending and Farm Bill extension package excluded funding for key organic “orphan” programs, even though the original bipartisan agreement had included funding for those programs.

I am very concerned about the consequences of that failure on the organic farmers of Vermont and nationwide, as well as the impact on USDA’s ability to crack down on fraudulent organic imports.

Specifically, my biggest concerns are about the defunding of:

The Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP), which is a tool established by Congress to help organic farms and businesses offset the annual cost of organic certification. Without it, the certification costs to organic operations will increase significantly in 2025. I fear that this may force many smaller farms to abandon organic certification altogether.

- a. Can you provide details about how the defunding of this program will impact organic farmers and businesses in 2025, and how much funding would be needed to fully operate the program in 2025?

Given I am not confirmed and am not yet serving at USDA, I am unable to provide formal details and technical assistance regarding the impacts of certain, unfunded orphan programs.

The Organic Certification Trade and Tracking Program (OCTT) I am concerned that its defunding will hamper the USDA’s ability to safeguard the integrity of the organic label. Most importantly, the new Strengthening Organic Enforcement rule, which originated in the first Trump Administration, has established new enforcement procedures to crack down on fraudulent organic imports. When fake organic products are allowed to enter our market, it not only undermines U.S. organic farmers, but it also negatively impacts the integrity of the USDA organic label and consumer trust in that label. The OCTT funding is critical to fully implement the new tracking technology system that is central to that effort.

- b. Can you provide more details about how the defunding of this program will impact the ability of USDA enforce rules against fraudulent organic imports?

Given I am not confirmed and am not yet serving at USDA, I am unable to provide formal details and technical assistance regarding the impacts of unfunded programs.

2. Farmers across America currently lose as much as \$3,300 dollars every year because of broken or inoperable equipment. This problem is significantly exacerbated by rampant abuse of restrictions on the ability of farmers and independent repair shops to fix equipment after it is sold. Manufacturers like John Deere — which alone controls more than half of the market for tractors and combines — prevent anyone but their authorized retailers from repairing Deere equipment, forcing farmers to watch their crops wither on the vine or the fields to sit unplanted waiting for an appointment at a shop that can be hundreds of miles away. In fact, the Federal Trade Commission just filed a complaint against Deere for making millions off of this unfair practice.

- a. Should you lead the Agriculture Department, will you commit to a comprehensive review of farm equipment markets and take action on any anticompetitive conduct this investigation might uncover? Will you cooperate with enforcers at the FTC and DOJ in any efforts they might undertake?

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) enjoy primary responsibility for the enforcement of our antitrust laws, including investigating farm equipment companies for alleged anticompetitive conduct.

3. Over the last fifty years, lax antitrust enforcement has allowed major corporations to establish unprecedented levels of concentration and control over virtually every sector of our economy. Nowhere is this truer than in food and agriculture, which has some of the highest degrees of concentration in any industry. As we seek to address potential abuses of these company's monopoly power, it is critical that we prevent the largest corporations from growing even larger. I was relieved to see the Federal Trade Commission successfully block Kroger's illegal proposed acquisition of their primary competitor, Albertsons, but am concerned that our enforcers might lack the resources or will to prevent future mega-mergers in agriculture.

- a. As Secretary of Agriculture, would you support a temporary moratorium on mergers from the largest agribusinesses?

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) enjoy primary responsibility for the enforcement of our antitrust laws, including merger reviews.

4. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Development (RD) oversees more than 70 programs to support Rural America. Every year, RD provides over \$40 billion in loans, loan guarantees, and grants to rural communities, helping rural areas access capital, and supporting community efforts related to disaster preparedness, resiliency, and recovery

Thanks to the Inflation Reduction Act, Vermont received historic investments to reduce energy costs, create jobs and investment, and support energy independence. For example, Vermont received \$40 million through the Rural Energy for America Program to help farmers and rural businesses invest in renewable energy projects or energy efficiency improvements. This includes \$14 million from the IRA. And for the first time ever, Vermont received \$1 million for a technical assistance pilot program through USDA Rural Development's Disaster Assistance Fund. The pilot program will help communities respond and recover in the wake of natural disasters.

These investments would not have been possible without Vermont's USDA RD dedicated state team, who understood how small towns operate, and the challenges their communities faced. Their knowledge is irreplaceable, in helping effectively invest in rural communities' futures. However, there is a challenge we must address. The regional RD office that serves Vermont and New Hampshire is currently operating at just 61% of its staffing capacity, the lowest of any regional office. This staffing shortage limits RD's ability to support our communities effectively. In addition, during President Trump's first term, USDA moved its administrative services to the national level, meaning all hiring decisions are now handled by USDA's national HR office. This has slowed down the hiring process. If we returned to the old system, where HR was managed within each state, the RD offices in Vermont and New Hampshire could hire staff more quickly and efficiently.

And earlier this week, President Trump announced a hiring freeze of federal employees. This is deeply concerning for my state's local RD office that is already understaffed.

- a. How will you work to address the staffing shortages to help USDA RD effectively deliver its programs for rural communities?

If confirmed, and as I implement the President's agenda, maintaining first-rate customer service, especially at the state and local level, remains a top priority.

5. Earlier this week, President Trump announced that all federal employees return to the office full time. This is deeply concerning for USDA offices in my state. Specifically, in 2022, USDA awarded Lumen Technologies a \$1.2 billion contract to deliver internet services across 9500 USDA locations. This transition to a new internet service provider

has led to slower internet access at FSA offices in my state, limiting FSA agents' ability to do work. Many of them have used the flexibility to telework to help them finish their tasks and use their time to efficiently serve rural communities.

Without the ability to telework, FSA agents would not be able to serve our rural communities effectively.

- a. How do you plan to advocate for telework policies to ensure that USDA is able to complete their work efficiently and in a timely manner, while ensuring that they're able to deliver essential services to farmers and rural communities.

I have not had a chance to review the particulars of the Executive Orders nor initial Department responses. However, if confirmed, and as I implement the President's agenda, maintaining first-rate customer service, especially at the state and local level, remains a top priority.

6. The United States has long been a leader in the fight against global hunger, however, just the week, President Trump announced a 90-day pause in foreign development aid, pending a review. As you know, USDA plays a large part in global nutrition aid through programs like Food for Peace and McGovern-Dole Food for Education, which have helped American farmers feed hungry people and support fellow farmers around the world for decades.

This is why this pause in aid is deeply concerning. As conflicts can cause hunger, hunger can cause conflict – with global instability on the rise, we can hardly afford to renege on our commitments to end hunger at home and abroad.

- a. Ms. Rollins, can you speak to how you plan to advocate for the importance of United States' global food aid programs in the Trump administration?

For more than 70 years, commodities grown by America's hard-working farmers have been the centerpiece of USDA and the Agency for International Development (USAID) global food security programs. As mentioned in my confirmation hearing, I will be a voice for all of American agriculture. I will commit to reviewing the jurisdiction the Department holds, and where appropriate, engage with USAID.

7. Since the beginning of 2019 food prices have risen by 28%. There are many reasons why food prices have risen since 2019, including supply chain disruptions due to the covid pandemic, the bird flu, severe weather, and corporate consolidation of the food industry to name a few.

While I am determined to work with my colleagues to bring down the cost of food, currently more than 47 million people in the United States face hunger, including 1 out of every 5 children. Those families need help now and cannot wait for market pressures and policy changes to be implemented. That is why USDA has programs like SNAP, WIC, and TEFAP. They are meant to ensure that no one goes hungry in our country when there are shocks to food prices, especially not children.

Unfortunately, administrative hurdles and rumored Republican-led cuts to SNAP threaten make it even more difficult for Americans to access these programs in the face of high food prices.

- a. Ms. Rollins, I've introduced multiple bills in the last Congress—including the *Streamlining Nutrition Paperwork Act* and the *SNAP Recertification Reform Act*—to reduce red tape in the SNAP program. If confirmed, how would you reduce administrative burden on SNAP and WIC applicants while maintaining and expanding access to these programs?

As mentioned during my confirmation hearing, and should I be confirmed, my team and I will spend time reviewing all nutrition programs housed at the Department, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). I look forward to better understanding all that is involved, including state administration, policy options, and program integrity and compliance.

8. In 2015, Vermont had 853 dairy farms, today that number is 441, with small and medium-scale farms representing the majority of closures. This is a trend mirrored throughout the country. Rising consolidation in the dairy industry has depressed prices, reduced competition, and forced smaller farms out of existence. Unfortunately, when these farms go out of business, the rural communities that they support begin to die too, leading to a hollowing out of Rural America.

- a. Ms. Rollins, if confirmed, how do you plan to address the exponential loss of family-scale dairies and farms in the United States?

If confirmed, I look forward to gaining a fuller picture of how USDA's several dairy policies—including the Organic Dairy Marketing Assistance Program, the Dairy Margin Coverage Program, the Dairy Forward Pricing Program, and the Dairy Indemnity Payment Program—are serving small and medium-scale farms, and whether they are additive. Exploring new export markets for U.S. agricultural products, including dairy, will also be a key priority.

Senator John Fetterman

1. I was encouraged last year, as part of the farm bill discussion, that sugar growers and food manufacturers agreed on some changes to the sugar program. Historically, that's unusual, to say the least. **As Congress writes a Farm Bill, will you commit that in making sugar policy decisions within the executive branch, you will take into account the interests of all parties, including growers, manufacturers and consumers?**

I commit to welcoming input from a variety of stakeholders.

2. I'm increasingly concerned with USDA procurement and its inaccessibility for small producers. For example, according to the Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition, 50% of USDA's \$4 billion food procurement budget was spent with only 25 businesses in 2022³⁶. **As the Big Four meatpackers continue to consolidate and push out competitors in the livestock sector, will you commit to work with me on increasing USDA procurement from small farmers and ranchers?**

Consistent with applicable law and to the extent practicable, I will work to ensure USDA programs, including procurement processes, best serve farms and ranches of all sizes. This is particularly important, given the number of farms in the U.S. declined by 141,733 farms or 7 percent in the latest USDA Census of Agriculture.

3. Specialty crops make up nearly one-third of U.S. agricultural production value, yet the availability of tailored crop insurance options remains inadequate for these producers, leaving them disproportionately exposed to financial risks. **What specific steps will you take to ensure that USDA's crop insurance programs better reflect the unique needs of specialty crop farmers, and how will you prioritize expanding accessibility to these critical tools?**

During my confirmation process, I have learned a lot about the important role specialty crops play regionally and throughout the United States.

It is my understanding there are a variety of tools and programs designed for specialty crop growers at USDA, including those you suggested under the Risk Management Agency, as well as the Agricultural Marketing Service, Farm Service Agency, Foreign Agricultural Service, National Institute for Food and Agriculture, among others. If confirmed, I look forward to hearing directly from specialty crop

³⁶ Richardson, S. & Waterman, C. (2023). Modeling climate, environmental, and social benefits of values-aligned food purchasing. *Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition*.

growers about their existing challenges with USDA programs and their proposed solutions. I look forward to working with you on these matters as well.

4. In 2023, USDA unveiled two new summer feeding options, Summer EBT and rural non-congregate, for eligible families at risk of hunger while their children are out of school. The Urban Institute found that state officials implementing Summer EBT specifically had issues with timelines to implement³⁷.
 - a. **What is your plan to support and grow these programs to ensure eligible children have consistent access to nutritious food during the summer months?**

If confirmed, I will be embarking on a review of all nutrition programs under the jurisdiction of the Department, including Summer Electronic Benefit Transfers (EBT). I strongly believe in states' ability to serve their communities, so my team and I will also spend time learning from those who have chosen to implement as well as those who have chosen other pathways.

- b. **How will you promote Summer EBT, especially, to encourage the states who did not adopt it in summer 2024 to adopt it in summer 2025?**

Similar to above, and if confirmed, my team and I will spend time learning from those who have chosen to implement Summer EBT, as well as those who have chosen different, perhaps more localized, responses to hunger during the summer months.

5. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a non-pricing meal service for schools with a high number of eligible, low-income students. Schools that participate in CEP typically have fewer students going to class hungry, which results in improved test scores, attendance rates and behavioral outcomes. **How do you plan to support schools currently participating in CEP and how do you plan to expand the program's reach?**

If confirmed, I will work to better understand the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), including its growth in recent years, to make sure it is not only working for families, but protecting the taxpayers responsible for funding the programs that benefit from it. And most importantly, making certain school meals are the best meals consumed, not just served.

6. An increasingly important part of US fruit and vegetable production is indoor farming, known as Controlled Environment Agriculture. However, most farm programs are designed to support traditional outdoor farming. I'm also supportive of small scale urban

³⁷ Gupta, P., Gutierrez, E., Meltzer, A., & Tezel, B. (2024). Opportunities to Improve Summer EBT. *Urban Institute*.

agriculture for food security. **How can USDA better support the needs of controlled environment agriculture and urban agriculture through the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production or other policy opportunities?**

I am aware that Pennsylvania has long been a leader in Controlled Environment Agriculture (CEA), and is even considered the mushroom capital of the world. These innovative technologies and systems provide Americans with access to healthy, local products and support the cultivation of these products year-round. In addition to CEA having the potential to improve Americans' health, these technologies and systems can also reduce our reliance on foreign imports.

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production created in the 2018 Farm Bill, related programs, and how they can better support innovative production practices like CEA.

7. Meat and poultry slaughter and processing workers face many job risks that can lead to severe injury, illness and death. Workers in these plants have also said that higher line speeds make it harder to maintain food safety. Meat and poultry processing workers work in cold, wet, noisy, and slippery conditions making tens of thousands of forceful repetitive motions on each shift. They are injured at 2.4 times the rate and face illness at 17 times the rate of other industries. This has led to a crisis of confidence with many workers leaving the industry and plants not fully staffed, which can lead to higher food prices.
 - a. **What will you do to ensure the safety of meat processing workers and give American workers the confidence they need to take these jobs?**

With respect to USDA's meat, catfish, poultry and egg safety inspection activities, I will work alongside the Department of Labor's Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) and Congress to uphold rigorous worker safety standards grounded in data.

- b. **What actions do you think that the Department of Agriculture needs to take to better protect workers' health and safety to prevent a slowdown in meat production and increased meat prices for American consumers?**

With respect to USDA's meat, catfish, poultry, and egg safety inspection activities, I will work alongside OSHA and Congress to uphold rigorous worker safety standards grounded in data. I believe this can occur while achieving our mutual goals of ensuring the U.S. has the safest, most abundant, and most affordable food supply.

8. One of the most consequential actions you will take if confirmed is the next reevaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP). In 2021, USDA updated TFP, for the first time in

decades, to consider the real costs and decisions Americans were facing at home and the grocery store. This modern update was made possible by the 2018 Farm Bill and it was bipartisan. **Will you commit to continuing this precedent of updating TFP based on the economic and other facts, and not predetermine that you will cut costs before the process even starts?**

If confirmed, I intend to prioritize not only a review of the 2021 process and outcome, but also any work on the 2026 update initiated under the Biden-Harris Administration.

9. In the 2023 appropriations omnibus (Division HH, Title IV, section 501(a)(2) of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023), Congress directed USDA to issue regulations to improve EBT card security, with the goal of protecting against card skimming, card cloning, and other similar fraudulent actions³⁸. More and more Pennsylvanians are falling victim to skimming, losing money they need to put food on the table. **Will you commit to publishing the notice of proposed rulemaking as quickly as possible?**

This is an issue of high priority for me. I have learned that the majority of this theft stems from transnational criminal rings, and it is so maddening they continue to target the most vulnerable among us. While states can—without delay—reimburse families, I, if confirmed, will commit to ongoing conversations with Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNCS) to ensure states, retailers, processors, and all involved across the EBT system, are being held accountable to preventing instances of theft. I will also partner with other agencies seeing similar theft, like the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) via Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and local and federal law enforcement who have been tracking these breaches, to ensure a whole of government approach to protecting our families.

10. A critical provision to extend SNAP benefit replacement for victims of SNAP benefit theft was excluded from the farm bill extension in the Continuing Resolution in late December. I am deeply concerned about the impact benefit theft is having on low-income Pennsylvanians and Americans. I hope you will join me in pushing for the critical protection to be restored at the next possible opportunity. In the meantime, it is important that USDA's dashboard that tracks skimming claims and payments be updated for the most recent information states report through the first quarter of fiscal year 2025 so that we have complete information on the scope of the problem while the benefit replacement provision was in effect. **Will you commit to maintaining this database and updating it regularly with current data?**

³⁸ Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, Office of Management and Budget. RIN: 0584-AE99. (2024).

If confirmed, I will prioritize reviewing what the Biden-Harris Administration published and work with my team on how to best convey what is happening across states.

11. I understand President Trump has different perspectives on regulations than his predecessor. One of the regulations that I hope we can agree on focuses on increasing transparency and competition in an industry facing monopolistic power: contract broiler production. As American Farm Bureau Federation President Zippy Duvall said, about the *Poultry Grower Payment Systems and Capital Improvement Systems* final rule, “This rule takes a step in the right direction, including requiring companies to provide insight into payment rates and details on capital improvements as part of a contract renewal. The final rule will benefit contract poultry growers nationwide.³⁹” It’s imperative that you review each regulation individually, and not blanket overturn each one just because the previous administration issued it. **Will you commit to promoting a fair, transparent, competitive agriculture industry, including by using Packers and Stockyards Act regulatory authority?**

If confirmed, I look forward to hearing from stakeholders and departmental experts about the various recent efforts pursued by both the Executive Branch and Congress aimed at market transparency in the food industry.

12. As of the most recent USDA report, there were roughly 8,700 units of occupied Section 515 housing units. All of these units are at risk of leaving the program if there isn’t an investment made in preserving the portfolio. This would put thousands of families in rural Pennsylvania at risk of displacement and homelessness in a time where the Commonwealth is already facing a growing housing shortage and affordability crisis.
- a. **Will you commit to taking all available actions under current authorities to keep existing USDA affordable housing stock in the portfolio?**

Section 515 offers loans for the development of new, or rehabilitation of existing, rental housing for low-income households in rural areas. If confirmed, I hope to gain a better understanding of USDA’s authorities under the Housing Act of 1949, including Section 515.

- b. **Will you work with Congress to help pass important rural housing reforms?**

If confirmed, I will work with both Congress and Scott Turner, Secretary-designate for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, on rural housing.

³⁹ Duvall, Z. (2025). Tournament Rule Provides More Transparency for America’s Farmers. *American Farm Bureau Federation*. Press release.

Further, Secretary-designate Turner and I have a long history of working together on issues impacting disadvantaged communities, dating back to when he served as Executive Director of the White House Opportunity and Revitalization Council, and when I led the White House Domestic Policy Council.

13. Dairy farmers in Pennsylvania and throughout the country have spent decades building international markets that they rely upon to grow and thrive. Mexico is the largest international dairy market and consistently ranks at the top for most other U.S. agricultural exports. **As the new administration works to address various issues with Mexico, what is your plan to ensure that our important partnership on agricultural trade is not disrupted?**

I appreciate the work of President Trump, United States Trade Representative Lighthizer, and so many others in the crafting of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement. I look forward to a more fulsome review, as well as participating, as the President sees fit, in the 2026 potential renegotiation. Because at the end of the day, our trading relationships and ability, not only to create but also to maintain market access, is so important to our producers' success.

Senator Adam B. Schiff

- 1) Federal wildland firefighters are entitled to pay that is commensurate with the critical and dangerous nature of the work they do. It's not only what they deserve, but it is key to recruiting and retaining the next generation of firefighters. The *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Public Law 117-58)* included a long-overdue pay raise for federal wildland firefighters that is set to expire in March. On Monday, January 20, 2025, President Trump issued an executive order directing all agencies to immediately pause the disbursement of funds appropriated under this legislation. Within 90 days, the EO directs all agency heads to submit a report on funds appropriated through the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act* that will inform the administration's support or opposition for the program. Ms. Rollins, do you believe that the pay raise afforded to the hardworking wildland firefighters under the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act* aligns with the policy priorities outlined in section 2 of this executive order?

While I am not ready to comment on the details of the initial Executive Orders, if confirmed, I am committed to ensuring that USDA has the best possible workforce to serve the American people. I have committed to understanding the extent of funding that the Department has available to distribute to specific projects.

- 2) As Secretary, will you allow pay cuts for federal wildland firefighter employees to go into effect?

My prayers are with the frontline first responders who have been tirelessly putting themselves at risk during these tragic disasters. I have also met with your colleagues, including Senators from both sides of the aisle, about the need to professionalize the wildland fire workforce. I am committed to working with Congress to support these brave men and women as every day they protect our communities.

- 3) During your nomination hearing, we discussed the important role that USFS plays in supporting state and local agencies' response to wildfires. Since the start of this month's wildfires in Los Angeles, USFS has allocated on-the-ground resources to state and local first responders, including 2,300 wildland firefighters, 12 large airtankers, 20 helicopters, 6 scoopers, and 8 Modular Airborne Firefighting Aircrafts. I appreciate your commitment during the hearing to ensure that California will receive the wildfire resources it needs from USFS, if you are confirmed as USDA Secretary. As Secretary, will you fulfill requests from the state of California specifically for the needed number of wildland firefighters, helicopters, scoopers, and Modular Airborne Firefighting Aircrafts during wildfire emergencies?

If confirmed, I look forward to working with you in the recovery effort and ensuring your constituents have the resources they need to rebuild quickly, efficiently, and safely.

Importantly, I appreciate California's commitment to waive the environmental and coastal commission requirements to expedite rebuilding efforts.

- 4) Under the first Trump administration's Market Facilitation Program, only 8 of the nearly 400 specialty crops grown in California were eligible for direct assistance. If confirmed as Secretary, will you work with Congress on a bipartisan basis to increase the number of specialty crops eligible for USDA financial assistance programs and ensure that the eligibility determinations are made without regard to the political party affiliation of the state's population?

During my confirmation process, I have learned a lot about the important role specialty crops play regionally and throughout the United States, including in California.

If confirmed, we will work to the best of our abilities to ensure USDA financial assistance programs are based on data—not politics—and that they are appropriately distributed.

- 5) Will you commit to working with myself, other members of the California delegation, and California's agriculture stakeholders to determine eligibility requirements under

future USDA financial assistance programs for farmers, including those meant to offset losses from tariffs?

If confirmed, I look forward to working with Members of Congress and impacted stakeholders from California, and all regions of the country for that matter, to see that any future USDA financial assistance programs are appropriately distributed.

- 6) For several months, California dairy farmers have grappled with massive outbreaks of avian flu among their herds. USDA is currently working with farmers, scientists, and state and local officials to conduct regular testing and surveillance of avian flu cases in cattle throughout the state. If confirmed as Secretary, will you ensure that these coordinated testing and surveillance efforts continue without interruption?

Getting a handle of recent animal-disease outbreaks is critical to protecting our domestic food security and reducing price volatility.

Highly pathogenic avian influenza was initially detected in 2024 in dairy, and since then 16 states have reported outbreaks in dairy cows. I know for your state, Senator, California dairies have been especially hit hard.

Further, all 50 states have seen outbreaks in poultry.

If confirmed, I look forward to requesting an immediate briefing on the Department's highly pathogenic avian influenza response efforts to date, including the most recent actions of milk testing which you describe above.

- 7) On matters that span both agriculture and public health – such as avian flu – it is critical that experts across federal agencies work together to implement a coordinated response. If confirmed as Secretary, how will you work with federal health agencies to respond to public health concerns under USDA's jurisdiction?

It is imperative that USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Health and Human Services' Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and White House Policy Councils execute strong, coordinated responses and consistency when it comes to animal disease outbreaks.

Robust coordination, not just on the federal level, but on the state level—via state departments of agriculture, state veterinarians and local officials all on the frontlines—is paramount to eradicating and preventing further spread of diseases, like highly pathogenic avian influenza and New World Screwworm.

I am already familiar with dozens of state departments of agriculture, and, if confirmed, I will work with them to eradicate and prevent further spread of animal disease.

- 8) There are nearly 40 two-year community colleges in California that have 180+ active degree and certificate programs in agriculture or agricultural-related fields, such as agribusiness, plant and animal science, and agricultural science and technology. As Secretary, what actions will you take to support institutions that help strengthen agricultural education and workforce training, recruitment, retention, and graduation pipeline that leads to good-paying jobs in the industry in California?

Whether growing up in Glen Rose, Texas, or now as a parent of four children, my life has always revolved around agricultural education, including through Future Farmers of America, 4-H, and Texas A&M. As such, I maintain a deep appreciation for all levels of agricultural education and training. If confirmed, I look forward to more directly partnering with institutions and also to exploring USDA Beginning Farmers and Ranchers programs. This is a particularly important effort, given the average age of today's farmer is 58 and only 9 percent of all producers are under the age of 35.

Further, I look forward to partnering with Department of Education Secretary-designate Linda McMahon on this exact type of education and workforce training.

- 9) In 2020, the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program Round One (CFAP-1) provided direct relief to agricultural producers who faced price declines and additional marketing costs due to COVID-19. Unfortunately, specialty crops were largely excluded from eligibility under the program. What changes, if any, would you make to the CFAP-1 program structure to increase specialty crop eligibility?

While broadly familiar given my prior time working in the White House, I have not been debriefed on the full, complex mechanics of the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program Round 1 (CFAP-1). It is my understanding, however, that the CFAP-1 program application period closed September 11th, 2020, and that there were subsequent rounds of CFAP in CFAP-2 and CFAP-3.

Throughout my confirmation process, I have learned a lot about the importance of specialty crops regionally and throughout the United States—including in California. I will ensure they are rightfully considered for future USDA programming, when lawful and appropriate.

- 10) In 2022, the USDA Forest Service launched a 10-year strategy to reduce the risk of catastrophic fires. The strategy provides priority landscapes nationwide, including three

in California, with the resources needed to help limit the impact of future wildfires. If confirmed as Secretary, will you continue the implementation of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy, and will you do so without regard to the political party affiliation of the state's population?

The devastating wildfires in California are an example that regardless of jurisdiction, the agency will respond with all the resources available to protect communities. I look forward to working with Congress and our state and local partners to understand and learn from these tragic events, to ensure we are addressing the threat of catastrophic wildfire and remain steadfast in our commitment to protecting communities across the nation.

- 11) USDA rural housing programs, such as Section 515 and Section 502, are essential for addressing housing needs in rural communities. However, these programs face persistent funding shortages and have been severely cut over the last few decades. If confirmed, what actions will you take to support access to affordable housing for rural families, seniors, and farmworkers?

If confirmed, I hope to gain a better understanding of USDA's authorities under the Housing Act of 1949, including Section 515 and 502.

Further, I look forward to working with Scott Turner, Secretary-designate for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, on tackling issues facing rural housing.

Secretary-designate Turner and I have a long history of working together on issues impacting disadvantaged communities, dating back to when he served as Executive Director of the White House Opportunity and Revitalization Council, and when I led the White House Domestic Policy Council.

- 12) Will you commit to maintaining support for USDA broadband efforts, including the Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants and ReConnect Program?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about ongoing efforts within USDA's Rural Development, Rural Utility Service, and its five major programs that support broadband deployment in rural areas.

As I shared with the Committee, one of my top policy priorities is to explore improvements to the Department's Rural Development programs in pursuit of long term, rural prosperity.

13) What steps will you take at USDA to ensure the Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants, and ReConnect Program are successful and completed on time and on budget?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about ongoing efforts within USDA's Rural Development, Rural Utility Service, and its five major programs that support broadband deployment in rural areas.