

November 10, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary of Agriculture  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

The undersigned organizations represent America's farmers and ranchers who sustainably produce safe and nutritious foods, including animal protein, for a growing global consumer base. Farmers and ranchers greatly value the health and safety of the men and women who show up every day to ensure that our meat and poultry products are processed safely and efficiently and that USDA programs deliver on their commitment to producers across the country who rely on them. We are concerned, however, that the implementation of Executive Order (EO) 14043 may lead to the unfortunate loss of U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service (USDA-FSIS) staff that may result in packing plant disruptions and closures at a time when harvest capacity is already limited due to increasing demand for meat and poultry, a severe labor shortage in rural communities, and COVID-19 related supply chain challenges.

Beyond the obvious challenges this mandate will pose for our supply chain, we are also concerned about impacts to unpaid roles within the Farm Service Agency (FSA) structure – including county committee members – whose expertise is vital to USDA program delivery on the ground.

Let us be clear, the intent of this letter is not to express our opposition to EO 14043. However, we are gravely concerned about the potential loss of FSIS employees at packing plants as a result of its implementation, along with so many other USDA staff who serve in critical roles across agencies and mission areas within the Department. As such, we write to respectfully request clarification on how USDA will mitigate potential disruptions in staffing with the implementation of this directive.

Unfortunately, there are many unfilled FSIS and FSA positions at existing establishments and across the country, and the loss of inspectors, as well as FSA staff and county committee members will only undermine USDA's efforts to bolster processing capacity and supply chain resiliency and impede our respective industries' economic recovery. It is imperative that USDA be able to supply new and expanding processing facilities alike with FSIS inspectors, veterinarians, and other positions such as Agricultural Marketing Service graders without jeopardizing staffing at existing plants. Further, we cannot emphasize enough how detrimental even minor disruptions in processing capacity and other critical USDA functions may be, as we cannot afford to exacerbate existing supply chain issues at such a fragile point in our recovery.

We greatly appreciate all that USDA has done to support our nation's farmers and ranchers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and this Administration's efforts to fortify our respective supply chains. Together, we will find new and innovative ways to accomplish this, while continuing to sustainably produce safe, affordable, and nutritious food and animal protein products for consumers around the world.

Sincerely,

American Farm Bureau Federation  
National Cattlemen's Beef Association  
National Pork Producers Council  
National Turkey Federation