

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 10, 2026

The Honorable Brooke Rollins
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Rollins,

I am writing to urge the U.S. Department of Agriculture to swiftly implement the recommendations in the Government Accountability Office's (GAO) recent report, *Agricultural Diseases and Pests: Nationwide Assessment and Strategy Needed to Enhance the Climate Resilience of Farms and Forests*. Farmers, ranchers, and foresters know all too well that the impacts of climate change are not distant or theoretical—they are already materializing on the ground and affecting their operations and livelihoods.

GAO found that USDA has taken few actions to enhance the resilience of farms and forests to climate-related diseases and pests, despite clear trends showing rapidly escalating threats. USDA's Climate Hubs—once instrumental in providing regionally tailored climate and pest information—have reduced their capacity at precisely the moment producers need them most.

The consequences of inaction are significant. Between 1960 and 2020, invasive species—including diseases and pests—cost U.S. agriculture and forestry at least \$550 billion. Climate change is further compounding these risks. A 2024 analysis estimated that shifting climate conditions could increase federal crop insurance costs by \$300 million to \$2.2 billion annually. Given the scale of documented losses and projected future costs, it would be fiscally irresponsible for USDA to disregard these findings or delay action.

The GAO report lays out a practical, forward-looking roadmap that USDA should adopt without delay. The first step is for USDA, in consultation with stakeholders across the agricultural and land-management communities, to conduct a nationwide risk assessment to identify and assess the relative risks of climate-related diseases and pests. Such an assessment would provide the analytical foundation for a national strategy to confront these threats before they escalate further. GAO identified four key activities that should inform such a strategy: “improve and coordinate monitoring and surveillances of diseases and pests, incorporate climate information into modeling and projection data, coordinate and expand education, outreach, and technical assistance, and modify existing or develop new diseases and pest management strategies.”

Farmers and foresters across Maine are already being forced to adapt to unpredictable and extreme weather, pest outbreaks, and shifting growing seasons. Visit with any producer across the country and their stories will confirm the urgent need for USDA leadership. Farmers in my state have seen dramatic increases in pest populations, requiring many to spend thousands of dollars investing in netting and high tunnels to protect their crops. Others have faced late freezes, heavy rainfall, extreme heat, and drought that have damaged or destroyed crops. Some have also struggled to obtain timely crop insurance or disaster assistance to recover from these losses. As the report notes, rising temperatures have enabled the southern pine beetle to expand its range into forests as far north as Maine. The resulting tree death and damage can leave forests more vulnerable to future insect outbreaks and wildfires.

These stories demonstrate that climate change is not a distant threat—it is a daily reality for Maine farmers, who are innovating and adapting but cannot shoulder the burden alone. USDA must meet this moment with urgency, leadership, and a clear commitment to implementing the GAO’s recommendations.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue. I look forward to your response to assist farmers, ranchers, and foresters facing the impacts of climate change and your plans to reduce climate-related risks to American agriculture and forestry while protecting taxpayers from avoidable future costs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Chellie R", followed by a horizontal line.

Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress