

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

April 10, 2025

THE HONORABLE BROOKE ROLLINS
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave
Washington, DC 20350

Dear Madam Secretary:

We write to you today deeply alarmed about an internal directive within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that appears to impose a politically motivated filter on discussions related to key scientific and policy matters within the Agricultural Research Service (ARS). According to a recently leaked memo issued by leadership at USDA-ARS, agency staff were informed that they may no longer use certain terms in evaluating agreements and awarding contracts presumably related to ARS's core functions, particularly to applicants who may have included banned words in their application.¹ The document outlines a sweeping and categorical prohibition against references to terms ranging from "affordable housing" to foundational elements of environmental protection such as "safe drinking water," "runoff," "PFAS," and "soil pollution."

In response to further reporting on this issue, a USDA spokesperson confirmed that "the leaked list of terms currently circulating was created by career employees tasked with reviewing active awards to ensure compliance with the President's priorities and relevant Executive Orders."² While the USDA spokesperson stated that leaders at USDA "were not involved in drafting this list of terms," it nevertheless remains your responsibility to ensure that all of USDA is implementing policies to support American agriculture and farmers, improve food security and safety, and conserve natural resources crucial to these missions.

This directive raises serious concerns about the integrity of your agency's decision-making processes, and we fear how this censorship will impact food security, environmental health, and the resilience of American agriculture. At a time when wildfires, drought, and other climate-fueled disasters are becoming increasingly dangerous and common, it is difficult to understand how official orders to suppress these topics are anything other than reckless and unhelpful.

Climate change is a scientifically established threat to agricultural productivity, food security, and our rural economies. Ignoring it does not make the problem disappear; rather, it substantially weakens our ability to address these issues, resulting in a wasteful focus on the symptoms instead of efficiently and effectively addressing the root of the problem. The exclusion of these terms from consideration for funding opportunities demonstrates an intentional effort to hinder, distort, and improperly steer federal scientific work in the name of political expediency, and the American people deserve far better than that.

¹ More Perfect Union (@MorePerfectUS), 2025, "SCOOP: A leaked memo reveals a huge list of terms banned by the USDA's Agricultural Research Service, including 'climate,' 'vulnerable,' and 'safe drinking water.' The department is responsible for monitoring crops to make sure they are not diseased and can be used for food," X, March 30, 2025, 10:52 am, <https://x.com/MorePerfectUS/status/1906358812291813719>.

² Seth Millstein, "Phrases Newly Banned at USDA Include 'Safe Drinking Water' and 'Climate Change,' Leaked Memo Reviews," *Sentient*, April 3, 2025, <https://sentientmedia.org/phrases-newly-banned-at-usda/>.

The American people deserve transparency and integrity from federal research agencies, not political interference and outright censorship. The farmers and ranchers who rely on sound science to navigate environmental and economic challenges should not have their livelihoods undercut by unscientific, bureaucratic gatekeeping. Critical research proposals to reduce pollution, increase irrigation efficiency, or address emerging pest and disease threats should not be denied solely because they used a phrase that Donald Trump does not like. When the agencies responsible for the safety and security of our food system refuse to acknowledge the realities of climate change, pollution, and equitable access to federal resources, they undermine their very missions and fail to meaningfully serve the American people.

We strongly oppose the continued use of key word lists in evaluating and reviewing USDA's agreements, contracts, grants, loans, and other programs. We expect you to provide immediate clarification regarding this directive and its implications. Please respond to the following questions, in writing, no later than April 18, 2025.

1. Has the USDA conducted any review to determine whether this policy violates federal transparency laws, scientific integrity policies, or anti-discrimination statutes? If so, please share the documentation. If not, please explain why a review has not been done.
2. The USDA has confirmed the existence of the ARS memo that has been publicly reported. Please provide any other lists of key words that the USDA is using to evaluate federal agreements, contracts, grants, loans, and other programs.
3. For each list provided under question 2, please explain the purpose of each list, including any relevant laws, regulations, Executive Orders, or memoranda that the USDA is seeking to comply with.
4. What safeguards have you put in place to ensure that these restrictions do not lead to biased or politically motivated decision-making at the expense of merit, scientific integrity, and public welfare?
5. Have these restrictions resulted in the rejection of agreements that would have directly benefited farmers, food supply security, or rural economies? If so, what processes does the USDA have in place to allow for the appeal of decisions and evaluations made based off key word lists for federal agreements, contracts, grants, loans, or other programs? Provide an itemized list of all agreements under all impacted programs that were rejected because they included one or more of these banned terms, as outlined in the directive, as well as a full justification for each rejection.
6. In the case of the ARS banned word list, if an ongoing research agreement is focused on biofuels, for example, the ARS website lists 29 research projects containing the word biofuel.³ Will funding for these projects be revoked? Will ongoing research be halted? Will USDA require projects to rephrase their contracts? If a project cannot be rephrased without using a banned word, will the contract be terminated?
7. What are the consequences for researchers or other agency employees who identify serious risks related to any of these banned terms, such as, for example, the expanded range of certain pests and

³ "Find a Research Project." Research Projects : USDA ARS. Accessed April 4, 2025. <https://www.ars.usda.gov/research/projects/?q=biofuel&type=all>.

diseases due to changing climate conditions, or nitrate contamination in the drinking water supply from fertilizer runoff?

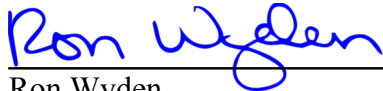
- a. Will research proposals and agreements to address these critical issues – and others that include banned terms – be considered under this policy?
- b. If so, through what process are they getting around the banned terms list, and how is that decided? If not, how do you justify such negligence?
- c. Are career scientists, policy experts, and agency staff being pressured to remove or avoid these terms in their work? If not, explain how USDA plans to enforce these restrictions. If so, how does that not constitute political coercion?

8. Does the USDA deny that climate change, pollution, and the accessibility of federal funding impact the safety and security of the American food supply? If so, provide your justification. If not, then why are these issues being censored?

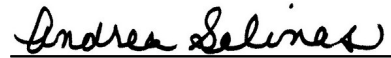
9. Will you release all internal communications regarding the creation, justification, and enforcement of this policy to ensure full transparency? If so, when? If not, why?

We look forward to your prompt response and an explanation of how your agency intends to ensure that science and factual analysis -- not politics -- remain at the core of its decision-making processes.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Andrea Salinas
Member of Congress



Jim Tokuda
Member of Congress



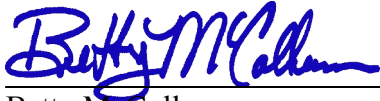
Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress



Terri A. Sewell
Member of Congress



Eleanor H. Norton
Member of Congress



Betty McCollum
Member of Congress



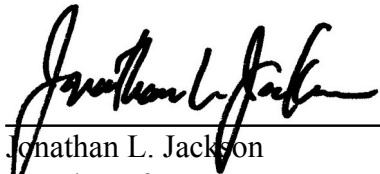
Shri Thanedar
Member of Congress



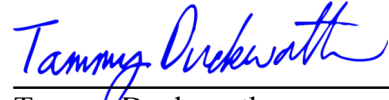
Rashida Tlaib
Member of Congress



Valerie P. Foushee
Member of Congress



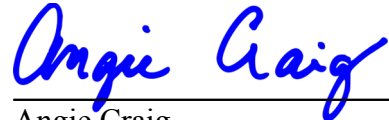
Jonathan L. Jackson
Member of Congress



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Maxine Waters
Member of Congress



Angie Craig
Member of Congress
Ranking Member, Committee on
Agriculture



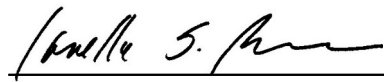
Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



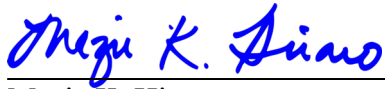
Maxine Dexter
Member of Congress



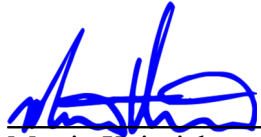
Emanuel Cleaver, II
Member of Congress



Janelle S. Bynum
Member of Congress



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator




Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



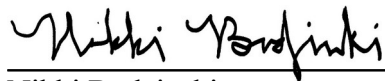
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



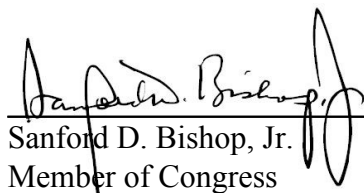
Ed Case
Member of Congress



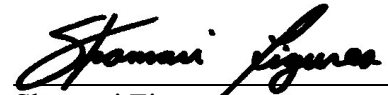
Timmy Panetta
Member of Congress



Nikki Budzinski
Member of Congress



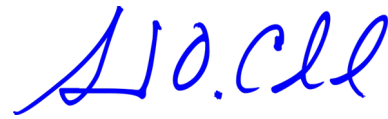
Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.
Member of Congress



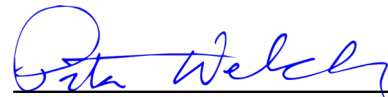
Shomari Figures
Member of Congress



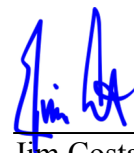
Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



Salud Carbajal
Member of Congress



Peter Welch
United States Senator



Jim Costa
Member of Congress



Tina Smith
United States Senator



Suzanne Bonamici
Member of Congress



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Deborah K. Ross
Member of Congress