

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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November 17, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Secretary Vilsack,

We are concerned with the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) rejection of the National Association of FSA County Office Employees' request for an exemption to President Biden's Executive Order Requiring Vaccination for Federal Employees.¹ According to the USDA COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan released on September 24, 2021, "all USDA employees must be fully vaccinated by November 22, 2021," with minimal exemptions.

Our offices have heard from numerous farmers and ranchers concerned with such far overreach by the Biden Administration and how this mandate will jeopardize the programmatic delivery of Farm Bill programs. While parts of the country are still recovering from an active 2020 and 2021 weather season, such as the Derechos and droughts in the Midwest, hurricanes and winter freezes in the South, and wildfires out West, ensuring the Department is keeping offices fully staffed is crucial. Primarily, a concern we all share is how this will negatively affect the implementation and payments of the Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP), Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees, and Farm-Raised Fish Program (ELAP), the Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP), and the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP).

That is why Congress appropriated \$10 billion for disaster programs and \$50 billion in forestry programs. Coupling these real-world issues with the increased popularity of USDA programs and the lack of appointments of state Farm Service Agency (FSA) Directors, FSA local and state offices are already stretched thin and lack leadership. Eleven months into this Administration, the Department has only appointed seven state FSA Directors. These positions do not require Senate confirmation. This continuation of ignoring the actual needs of the agriculture community and discounting the request of your employees is disappointing.

These local and state FSA offices, and state FSA Directors, play a pivotal and crucial function in interacting with the agriculture community. Any attempt by the Department to jeopardize these offices threatens thousands of rural communities. Any loss of key staff in these offices will result in the loss of decades of experience and knowledge. As you know, recruiting and retaining local and state FSA personnel is a complex and slow process, and this mandate will exacerbate this process, as you stated in August. To quote you, "I think there were 3,000 to 4,000 fewer people working in USDA. So, at the same time, we're trying to get these resources out the

¹ Tyne Morgan, *FSA Farmer Fallout? Vaccine Mandate Pegs All Personnel, Including Elected County Committee Members*, AG WEB, Oct. 8, 2021.

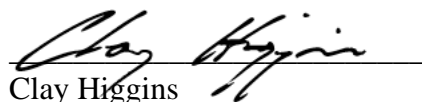
door and do all of this work that's important to people, we're also trying to step up, and we're trying to deal with the Pandemic."²

While the concern about the loss of staff in local FSA offices and lack of state director appointments is legitimate, the mandate also raises economic, food, and national security alarms. The two major unions representing the Department's meat, plant, and poultry inspectors and scientists were warning over significant layoffs just the other day.³ Playing politics with American's food supply is profoundly concerning. With the threat of African Swine Fever knocking on our door, South Korea's confirmation of High Path Avian Influenza, and the continuing rising cost of household foods, any further action by the Department that would increase these risks is misguided.⁴

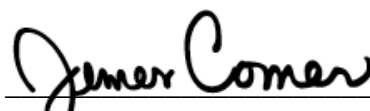
We respectfully ask you to delay the implementation of this mandate until the Department can explain how it will make up for the potential loss in staff and when the remaining 43 FSA State Directors will be appointed.

The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate "any matter" at "any time" under House Rule X.

Sincerely,



Clay Higgins
Member of Congress



James Comer
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Reform



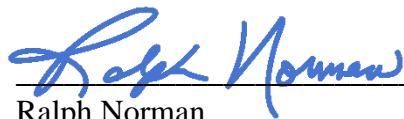
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Subcommittee on Government Operations



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Michael Cloud
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Subcommittee on Economic
and Consumer Policy



Ralph Norman
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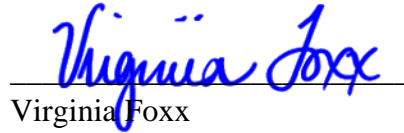
² Tyne Morgan, *Is a Flood of FSA Staffing Shortages Coming Soon? USDA Denies FSA Vaccine Exemption Request*, FARM JOURNAL, Oct. 25, 2021.

³ Steve Davies, *Union reps warn of USDA impacts of federal COVID-19 vaccine mandate*, AGRIPULSE, Nov. 3, 2021.

⁴ *S. Korea confirms highly pathogenic bird flu case in 7 months*, THE STATESMAN, Nov. 2, 2021.



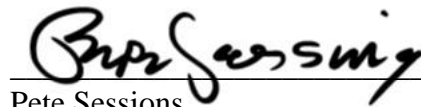
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Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Civil Rights
and Civil Liberties



Virginia Foxx
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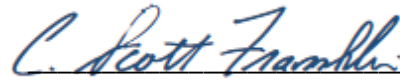
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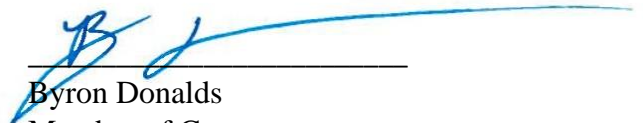
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Scott Franklin
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Jake LaTurner
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Byron Donalds
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Carolyn Maloney, Chairwoman
Committee on Oversight and Reform

The Honorable Gerald E. Connolly, Chairman
Subcommittee on Government Operations

The Honorable Stephen F. Lynch, Chairman
Subcommittee on National Security

The Honorable Raja Krishnamoorthi, Chairman
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The Honorable Ro Khanna, Chairman
Subcommittee on Environment

The Honorable Jamie Raskin, Chairman
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties