

Goodbye, U.S.D.A., Hello, Department of Food and Well-Being

It's time the secretary of agriculture leverages the department's impact for more than the benefit of agribusiness.

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At best, only a small number of farm families actually make a living primarily from farming, while Big Food posts record sales and profits. Credit...Ben Stechschulte/Redux

With just one cabinet appointment, President-elect Joe Biden could tackle economic inequality, the rural/urban divide, climate change, the growing mistrust of science, systemic racism and even the coronavirus.

That appointment is Secretary of Agriculture.

Some view the U.S. Department of Agriculture (U.S.D.A.) as a backwater that matters only to the nation's two million farmers. But this perception is at odds with both the department's actual budgetary allocation and its history: Two thirds of the U.S.D.A.'s

\$146 billion [annual outlay](#) goes to programs addressing nutrition and food insecurity, not to agriculture (or forestry, also in the department's domain).

And the U.S.D.A. invests [hundreds of millions](#) each year in financial and technical assistance for rural communities to improve infrastructure that most urban residents take for granted — electrification, broadband access, water and waste disposal, housing, health care and public safety. Yet broad sections of the rural population feel — indeed have been — left behind.

Even with this aid, the U.S.D.A. supports a system that, overall, prioritizes trade and profit at the expense of most farmers, the environment and everyday Americans — instead of encouraging a food system that provides a thriving livelihood for farmers and farmworkers, environmental protection and healthy food for all. At best, [7 percent](#) of farmers are able to make a living from farming; food chain workers earn poverty wages; large-scale agriculture poisons land, water and air and contributes mightily to climate change; and good food is available only to the relatively wealthy.

In normal times, 10.5 percent of U.S. households are food insecure, a number that has nearly doubled during the pandemic. And our junk-food diet has made nearly three quarters of us overweight or obese, which in turn causes our notoriously high rates of diabetes, hypertension and cardiac disease, shortening life spans and predisposing many to complications from COVID-19.

Enlightened leadership at the U.S.D.A. could begin to change all of this. Rather than seeing its paramount mission as supporting agribusiness, the new secretary could steer the department toward becoming what President Lincoln envisioned when he established it — “the people’s department,” with responsibility to everyone in the nation.



When the U.S.D.A. was founded more than 158 years ago, about half of all Americans lived on farms; today less than 1 percent of the population are farmers. Credit... Ben Stechschulte/Redux

When the U.S.D.A. was founded more than 158 years ago, about half of all Americans lived on farms; today just 0.6 percent of the population are farmers, and we devote only [20 percent](#) of agricultural land to produce food we eat.

But while the demographics of agriculture have changed, everyone is affected by a farm system that degrades the environment, drives climate change and churns out a junk food diet. That same system has displaced people and extracted wealth from rural communities, driving monopolistic concentration and record profits for Big Food, while almost all farmers [must supplement their income](#) with off-farm jobs.

These dysfunctions began long before the decline of the family farm. The U.S.D.A. has long been accused of discrimination in dispensing its services and resources, and of intentionally driving the commercial success and wealth building of white farmers while causing the failure, bankruptcy and land loss of Black, Hispanic, Native American and women farmers and ranchers. A series of legal actions from the late 1990s, including the *Pigford v. Glickman* and *Keepseagle v. Vilsack* lawsuits, resulted in settlement agreements that paid millions to eligible class members to compensate them for their discrimination claims against the department.

The U.S.D.A. still reflects the culture of 1862, the year of its creation and of the passage of the Homestead Act, which gave more than [270 million acres](#) of Native American land

to white settlers. At the same time, the Morrill Act “distributed” an additional [11 million acres](#) of appropriated Native land to establish a network of state colleges of agriculture and mechanic arts, a network that to this day serves whites preferentially. (A series of [underfunded land-grant universities](#) was established in 1890 and 1994 in a feeble attempt to paper over this federally sanctioned racism.) The result of this social engineering is aggregate assets of around [\\$2.7 trillion](#), held disproportionately among today’s farmers, [96 percent of whom](#) are white.

There’s another sense in which the U.S.D.A. is bound to the past. Large-scale plantation agriculture, a major reason the South seceded from the Union, was a mercantilist economic system. The production of cotton, sugar, tobacco, rice and other commodities drove a web of global trade that enriched profiteers, corporations and nations at a distance from the enslaved people who labored under brutal conditions to generate that wealth. That same model of agriculture — cash crops grown primarily for processing or trade rather than for eating, a brutally exploited work force — has become the norm, and has been consistently promoted by recent secretaries of agriculture, most stridently by the incumbent, an agribusiness veteran.

That template still benefits mainly the global conglomerates that sell to and buy from farmers, to the great economic detriment of the majority of farmers and their rural communities, and especially to that of the largely immigrant work force that replicates the work of the formerly enslaved, with [largely imperceptible improvement in their treatment](#).

Yet the American model of agribusiness profiting from low value commodities combined with through-the-roof production volume works so badly for farmers that the system is propped up by federal subsidies — until recently [\\$15 billion](#) per year — that are funneled into the bottom lines of mega-corporations. Since 2018, however, an additional \$60 billion of taxpayer money has been splurged on this sector, making it one of the most socialized sectors of the economy.



Workers on H2A visas harvesting beets. Credit... Ben Stechschulte/Redux

Expanding the department's vision of the food system beyond the interests of agribusiness would allow the U.S.D.A. to promote health and well-being for all. For President-elect Biden to "build back better," he will need a secretary of agriculture who cares not only about how food and industrial products are produced, but also for whom, and to what general public good.

The secretary of agriculture should lead the fight against corporations that have created a toxic food environment and support groups building healthful alternatives. The secretary should champion unity among farmers, rural people and urban advocates for racial and economic justice against the common enemy of consolidation and concentration of wealth. And the secretary should use the department's vaunted research and extension capacity to support a food system that can rebuild rural economies, regenerate ecological capital, mitigate climate change and provide nourishing food for all.

While we're at it, we might as well change the department's name from its archaic, misleading misnomer to something that reflects the country's needs: a Department of Food and Well Being.

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