

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 12, 2025

Dear Secretary Rollins,

We write to express serious concerns regarding the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) decision to lay off Agricultural Research Service (ARS) staff. These actions threaten critical agricultural research that strengthens food security, bolsters rural economies, and supports farmers, fishermen, and ranchers. We urge USDA to provide clarity on the status of ARS staffing levels and detail the steps it is taking to reinstate terminated staff and mitigate the disruptions.

ARS research plays an essential role in ensuring the long-term viability of American agriculture. Its scientists, technicians, and support staff innovate to combat pests and diseases, improve crop yields, fight soil erosion and wildfires, and adapt practices to the effects of climate chaos. The layoffs threaten the broader research ecosystem by disrupting ARS's partnerships with universities and private industry. These collaborations ensure that research translates into real-world applications that improve efficiency, sustainability, and resilience in American agriculture. The loss of ARS personnel undermines these efforts, leaving knowledge gaps that could take years to fill. These cuts will have lasting consequences for the agricultural community, researchers, and rural communities, and must be reversed now.

The loss of ARS personnel has already disrupted areas of study that are vital to Oregon's agricultural community. Industry leaders have voiced concerns about the consequences of these cuts. Jeff Stone, Executive Director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries, makes clear that "These positions are critical to essential research for agriculture and compromise the research and experiment stations across the state. Research is critical for the long-term viability of nursery operators that bring in over \$1.2 billion in traded sector dollars into the state." These disruptions jeopardize not only research efforts but also the livelihoods of farmers, fishermen, and ranchers who rely on ARS findings to maintain productivity and competitiveness.

The impact of these staffing cuts is particularly severe in Oregon, where at least 15 agricultural researchers have been laid off. Many of these scientists, technicians, and support staff collaborated with Oregon State University and industry stakeholders on research essential to the state's agricultural economy, including projects focused on blueberries, tree fruits, and legumes. The ARS Pacific Shellfish Research Unit supports industry and coastal ecosystems by breeding disease-resistant oysters, studying ecological interactions, and improving shellfish stocks. These terminations eliminate crucial expertise and fracture longstanding partnerships that drive agricultural innovation. Without these researchers, ongoing studies are left in limbo, creating uncertainty for grazers, growers, and harvesters who depend on ARS.

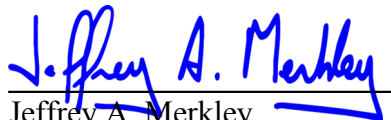
Because we continue to receive reports of impacts to ARS staffing, please respond to the following questions:

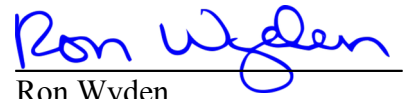
1. How many ARS staff have been fired since January 20, 2025, and does USDA have plans or processes for reinstating fired employees? If so, please describe the plans or processes.
2. How does USDA intend to address disruptions caused by the reduction in ARS personnel on ongoing research projects?

3. What criteria were used to determine which ARS staff positions were terminated and which were reinstated? Please provide a list of the criteria used in these decisions.
4. How does USDA plan to mitigate the impact of these layoffs on collaborative research efforts with universities and industry partners?
5. What measures is USDA implementing to ensure that critical research areas, such as pest management, drought resiliency, crop yield, and climate adaptation, continue without interruption?
6. How is USDA engaging with industry stakeholders to assess and address the impact of these staffing changes?
7. What steps is USDA taking to prevent similar disruptions in the future and ensure the stability of ARS research programs?
8. Will you commit to reinstate all ARS fired since January 20, 2025, including technicians and support staff?

Given the importance of ARS research to farmers, fishermen, ranchers, and agricultural stakeholders across the country, we urge USDA to take immediate steps to reinstate all affected researchers. The continuation of ARS's vital work is critical to ensuring the long-term stability and success of American agriculture.

Sincerely,


Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator


Ron Wyden
United States Senator