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DOGE

USDA says it accidentally fired officials working on bird flu and is now trying to rehire them

An Agriculture Department spokesperson told NBC News that officials are "working to swiftly rectify the situation."

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/ Updated

By Allan Smith, Melanie Zanona and Laura Strickler

The U.S. Department of Agriculture said Tuesday that, over the weekend, it accidentally fired "several" agency employees who are working on the federal government's response to the H5N1 avian flu outbreak.

The agency said it is now trying to quickly reverse the firings.

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"Although several positions supporting [bird flu efforts] were notified of their terminations over the weekend, we are working to swiftly rectify the situation and rescind those letters," a USDA spokesperson said in a statement. "USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service frontline positions are considered public safety positions, and we are continuing to hire the workforce necessary to ensure the safety and adequate supply of food to fulfill our statutory mission."

We're looking to hear from federal government workers who have been laid off. If you're willing to talk with us, please email us at tips@nbcuni.com or contact us through one of these methods.

The spokesperson noted that several agency positions were already exempted from the sweeping cuts President Donald Trump's administration is making across the federal government, adding that the Agriculture Department "continues to prioritize the response to highly pathogenic avian influenza."

The error is the latest in the Trump administration's attempts to rapidly shrink the size of the government by conducting mass firings of federal workers — an effort that is being carried out by tech billionaire Elon Musk and the U.S. Department of Government Efficiency, which is heavily staffed by people who have no experience in government.

On Friday, the administration tried to notify some nuclear safety employees who were fired last week that they are now due to be reinstated — but struggled to find them because they didn't have their new contact information.

The latest episode comes as the virus has decimated poultry flocks and has sent egg prices soaring. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention confirmed 68 cases among humans in the U.S. so far. On her first day in office, Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins convened a panel on bird flu and "reviewed options for a comprehensive strategy to combat it," the department said in a release.

Several agencies within the Agriculture Department play a role in responding to the outbreak, including the Agricultural Research Service and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. On Sunday, Politico reported that some of the Trump administration's layoffs hit the National Animal Health Laboratory Network, which is involved in avian flu research.

The layoffs concerned a number of Republican lawmakers, who privately warned the Trump administration that such cuts could hamper the government's bird flu response and asked them to reconsider, according to two Republican sources with direct knowledge of the situation.

Lawmakers had received little guidance from the administration about the recent program cuts and staff terminations at USDA, which sources said has frustrated Republicans on the House Agriculture Committee. The panel, which oversees the USDA, provided a briefing to its members over the weekend to try to provide some more clarity to lawmakers.

"They need to be more cautious," Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., a member of the Agriculture Committee, told NBC News of the DOGE team. "There's an old saying, 'Measure twice, cut once.' Well, they are measuring once and having to cut twice. Some of this stuff they're going to have to return back. I just wish they'd make a better decision up front."

The layoffs also concerned researchers working on bird flu. Keith Poulsen, director of the Wisconsin Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, said that the firing of three employees at the USDA's National Animal Health Laboratory Network program would hurt efforts to combat the spread of the virus.

"It's creating a lot of problems," he said.

Egg prices, which were already high, have continued to soar as the bird flu has spread. Several committee members, who were back in their districts this week, told NBC News they are hearing an earful from constituents over the sky-high price of eggs.

Republicans on the House Agriculture Committee have raised their concerns to the chairman, Rep. Glenn "GT" Thompson, R-Pa., and his staff, who have been working to relay those concerns to the USDA and obtain more information about the moves, sources said.

In a statement to NBC News, Thompson expressed broad support for the DOGE mission.


"With Secretary Rollins now confirmed, we anticipate further clarity on the status of this review across USDA mission areas," Thompson said in a statement.

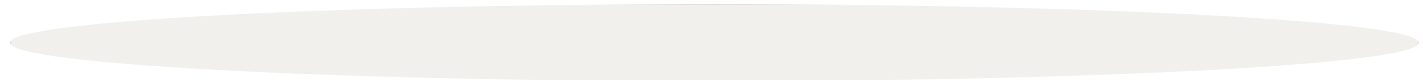
Some Republicans have also complained about cuts to a program that works with poultry farmers to reduce the number of birds around airports in an effort to enhance aviation safety. And more broadly, there is uncertainty over how widespread funding cuts across the government, as well as new restrictions on funding for National Institutes of Health grants, may affect infectious disease researchers and local health officials working to respond to the bird flu

Latest data from USDA shows 151 confirmed flocks have been hit, affecting 23 million birds.

In recent days, the Trump administration has fired probationary employees across the government — a move that could affect hundreds of thousands of people, according to data from the Office of Personnel Management. An agency spokesperson said the administration would not be able to provide full details on how many individuals were fired until Tuesday evening.

Probationary status typically applies to someone who has been with the federal government for less than two years — before full civil service protections kick in. But it can also apply to longtime civil service workers who move to a different agency or take a promotion.

The Trump administration has cited "performance" issues in letters to fired employees explaining why they were let go — though some of those same employees have received strong performance reviews from their superiors. 



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