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# Mass firings strike USDA across agencies, including field staff

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USDA's Jamie L. Whitten Building on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

The Trump administration's mass firing of probationary federal employees has swept out workers across USDA, including loan analysts in Farm Service Agency field offices, ag scientists, and about 1,200 staff of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, according to sources.

The number of firings isn't known but there are more than 200,000 federal employees nationwide on probationary status, which means they are in their first year of federal employment, or in some cases the first two years.

Multiple sources told

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on Friday that USDA also is demoting employees who were recently given senior executive service status, which is reserved for top-performing managers just below presidentially appointed positions.

Multiple termination notices viewed by

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also include language claiming the firings were based on performance, when in fact the terminations extended to all probationary employees. In addition, employees said they had either received good performance reviews or no formal reviews at all.

A spokesperson for Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins said in a statement to

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that Rollins "fully supports President Trump's directive to optimize government operations, eliminate inefficiencies, and strengthen USDA's ability to better serve American farmers, ranchers, loggers and the agriculture community.

"We have a solemn responsibility to be good stewards of Americans' hard-earned taxpayer dollars and to ensure that every dollar is being spent as effectively as possible to serve the people, not the bureaucracy. As part of this effort, USDA has released individuals in their probationary period of employment.

"We are confident that talented individuals who have been affected by this change will have many opportunities to contribute to our economy and society in countless ways outside of government."



A department press release issued late Friday said "

USDA is pursuing an aggressive plan to optimize its workforce by eliminating positions that are no longer necessary, bringing its workforce back to the office, and relocating employees out of the National Capital region into our nation's heartland to allow our rural communities to flourish."

The department also touted the cancellation of contracts including media subscriptions and the end of diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility programs and positions.

Zach Ducheneaux, who served as FSA administrator during the Biden administration, said the firings of loan officers would likely make it harder for farmers to get USDA loans.

"Firing local FSA loan officers is not only a waste of taxpayer investment in their training, producers will lose the opportunity to buy a farm or ranch, if not lose their existing farm or ranch," Ducheneaux said. "They will not be able to get their operating money in a timely fashion. That's not hyperbole. It is actual, literal fact."

An estimated 40% of USDA loan officers are eligible for retirement, according to a congressional source familiar with USDA. The source said Congress has given FSA \$30 million over the last two years to hire staff to replace those nearing retirement.

"FSA has to do this because it is a two-year training cycle for loan officers before they are fully operational. All this talent is now gone," the congressional source said.

One terminated Agricultural Research Service employee who spoke with

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but did not want to be identified by name said he got an email at 11:29 p.m. Thursday saying he was terminated due to poor performance. The worker, who had been employed for less than a year, said he never had a formal performance review.

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"What I think is just totally unfair is, you know, we were given the 'fork in the road' email and you could just type your resignation along with your name and send it back," the former employee said. The "fork in the road" email, which went to all federal employees, offered them full pay them until Sept. 30 if they would resign immediately.



"Now, I don't think we're going to be getting anything," the ex-employee said, adding, "We're supposed to get paid today, and I still haven't seen the paycheck for normal services rendered."

Approximately 1,200 Natural Resources Conservation Services employees are believed to have been fired, according to a source close to the agency who spoke to

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on the condition of anonymity.

The firings will be a setback for NRCS, which has been trying for years to increase its workforce to help producers implement conservation practices. Many of the impacted staff work in county offices, often serving as farmers' first points of contact when applying for a federal program, the source said.

"I think this is a lot of steps backwards in terms of the ability to serve those producers," the source said.

The termination notices viewed by

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included language such as "the agency finds, based on your performance, that you have not demonstrated that your further employment at the agency would be in the public interest."

One terminated NRCS employee said in a message to

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that they had two spot performance awards, "fully met expectations" on their annual review last fall, and were recently promoted from GS-9 to GS-11 because of their performance." GS-9 and GS-11 are federal employment pay grades.

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identified dozens of former USDA employees who reported being fired in social media postings, including staff from the USDA National Bio & Agro-Defense Facility, National Laboratory of Agriculture and the Environment, U.S. Forest Service and Rural Development agency stationed in various positions across the U.S., among others. One terminated employee was a doctorate level research molecular biologist in the USDA ARS.

The American Federation of Government Employees, which represents about 100,000 people at USDA, condemned the firings.

"Despite OPM's guidance earlier this week advising agencies not to engage in sweeping terminations, the administration has plowed forward,"

AFGE National President Everett Kelley said

(<https://www.afge.org/publication/afge-president-everett-kelley-condemns-trump-administrations-mass-firing-of-federal->




employees/)

. "Employees were given no notice, no due process, and no opportunity to defend themselves in a blatant violation of the principles of fairness and merit that are supposed to govern federal employment."

Another 75,000 federal employees accepted the offer from the Trump administration to leave their jobs in return for getting paid through September. USDA has not said how many department employees took the offer.

According to the Partnership for Public Service, 38% of USDA employees were eligible for retirement at the end of 2023. Some 63% of USDA employees in the senior executive service were eligible for retirement.

"What a Valentine's Day  letter," wrote one terminated USDA-NRCS employee in a LinkedIn post, announcing that they were now looking for employment.

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