

Hijacking the Regulatory Policy

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Report: USDA Regulatory Policy Has Been 'Hijacked' by Agribusiness Industry

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OMAHA, Neb. July 23 /U.S. Newswire/ -- A new report released today finds that regulatory policy at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has been "hijacked" by the agribusiness industry, which has seen to it that many key policymaking positions at the agency are now held by individuals who previously worked for the industry.

The report, titled USDA INC., was commissioned by the Agribusiness Accountability Initiative (AAI), a network of family-farm and public-interest groups concerned about the growing power of the big agri-food corporations. It is being released today at a conference in Omaha sponsored by the Organization for Competitive Markets. The report can be found [online](#) after 9 a.m. Eastern Time.

"In its early days, USDA was known as the People's Department," said Fred Stokes of the Organization for Competitive Markets, which first proposed the paper. "Today, it is, in effect, the Agribusiness Industry's Department, since its policies on issues such as food safety and fair market competition have been shaped to serve the interests of the giant corporations that now dominate food production and distribution."

"It is not surprising that USDA is slavishly following the agenda of agribusiness when you consider who holds many of the top jobs at the Department," said Philip Mattera, director of the Corporate Research Project of Good Jobs First and author of the report. "The upper ranks of USDA are filled with industry veterans, while people formerly associated with family-farm, consumer or public-interest groups are just about nowhere to be found."

In addition to working directly for agribusiness companies such as ConAgra and Campbell Soup, top USDA officials came to the Department from industry trade associations (such as the Food Marketing Institute) and producer groups (such as the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the National Pork Producers Council), which are closely aligned with big processing companies and are partially funded by them. Even Secretary Ann Veneman, who has spent most of her career as a public official, has a past industry connection: she served on the board of directors of Calgene Inc., a biotechnology company that was later taken over by Monsanto.

"It's difficult to avoid the conclusion that agribusiness has packed USDA with its people," said Peter O'Driscoll. Larry Mitchell of the Center of Concern, coordinator and co-sponsor of American Corn Growers Association, another participant in AAI.

The report illustrates the hijacking of USDA policymaking through five case studies:

- USDA's refusal to adopt strict safety and testing measures for bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), despite the appearance of a case in Washington State last year.

- USDA's refusal to vigorously enforce rules against anti-competitive practices in the cattle industry, despite the growing tendency of the big meatpacking companies to force independent ranchers into so-called captive supply arrangements.
- USDA's promotion of weakened slaughterhouse inspection practices in the face of a resurgence of health hazards such as E.coli bacteria and listeria. The Department also continues to promote dubious "solutions" such as irradiation.
- USDA's continuing boosterism for agricultural biotechnology, despite a lack of consumer acceptance and the plunge in exports due to international resistance to genetically modified crops.
- USDA's support for concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), despite the growing evidence of serious public health effects of these factory farms. The Department has also supported the misguided policy of using conservation dollars to subsidize the futile attempts of CAFOs solve their manure problems.

In each of these cases, the report notes the presence of industry veterans among the chief officials responsible for adopting or maintaining these questionable policies.

The report concludes with a set of recommendations on how to begin loosening the grip of agribusiness on USDA's policies. These include:

- Reappraisal of ethics rules to prevent government officials from overseeing policies that directly affect the interest of their former employers;
- Enhancement of Congressional oversight over regulatory appointees;
- Evaluation of whether USDA can continue to serve both as a promoter of U.S. agricultural products and a regulator of food safety; and
- Further research on revolving-door conflicts of interest at USDA. Progress on these measures, the report argues, will begin to turn USDA Inc. back into an arm of government that represents the public interest.

The report was commissioned by a working group of the Agribusiness Accountability Initiative. The following working group members helped research and edit the paper:

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- Patty Lovera, [Public Citizen](#)
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- Peter O'Driscoll, [Center of Concern](#)
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