

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 18, 2025

The Honorable Brooke Rollins
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Madam Secretary:

Congratulations on your confirmation as Secretary of Agriculture. We know many pressing concerns await you as you begin your new role. We write to ask that you enhance the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) response to the ongoing outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in our nation's animal agriculture sector, which we greatly appreciate you announcing as a top priority in your testimony before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry.

The United States is now entering the fourth year of an outbreak of HPAI that has devastated farms, required the depopulation of more than 136 million birds on commercial poultry operations, and infected a small but growing number of farm workers. A new urgency is required from the USDA to address the evolving situation.

We support measures that have been proposed to you by egg and turkey farmers, many of whose operations have suffered HPAI outbreaks. These measures include the following:

- An aggressive, forward-looking strategy for vaccination in affected laying hens and turkeys, including the acquisition of vaccine stockpiles, field trials of vaccines, the development of more practical methods of vaccine administration, and outreach to trading partners to ensure trade is not significantly impacted and that they understand the need for vaccines and abide by international standards for maintaining trade;
- An HPAI Strategic Initiative to engage experts within industry, universities, and government to expand knowledge and develop novel methods of prevention, detection, and response; and
- Movement controls that apply to all animals that present risks and support for states moving quickly through the first four stages of USDA's National Milk Testing Strategy.

Two related matters also require USDA's attention. First, an interim rule issued in December 2024 requires biosecurity audits on previously infected farms, or farms placed within a buffer zone of a control area, to be eligible for indemnities. In principle, this change would appear to enhance biosecurity measures and accountability for indemnity, but the rule was rushed. As a result, nearly no auditors have been trained to complete these audits, and the audit itself was posted in draft form. USDA should provide adequate numbers of qualified auditors prior to enforcement of the rule.

Second, current indemnity rates for laying hens and pullets are based on inaccurate data and are artificially low. We support a proposal by the egg industry to revise these calculations, relying entirely on data from USDA and land-grant institutions, in order to make indemnities fairer. HPAI indemnities are similar to disaster assistance for crops and livestock—the funds respond to a catastrophic situation that producers could not have averted and never fully make up for the entire loss. The indemnities also recognize that producers are legally compelled to depopulate their flocks in an HPAI infection—they do not have a choice. Even with revisions to indemnity formulas proposed by egg farmers, these payments will not come close to making producers whole for their losses. In reviewing indemnity activities, we would also urge you to ensure proper outreach to all farmers.

We stand ready to work with you as you provide leadership on this vitally important issue, the largest animal health outbreak that the department has ever dealt with. Thank you for making the HPAI response a priority.

Sincerely,



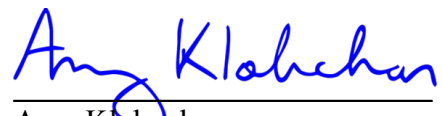
Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator



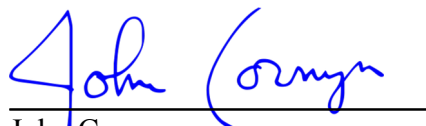
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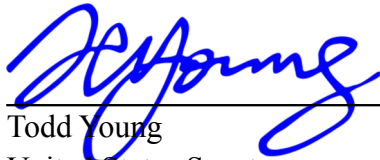
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Ted Budd
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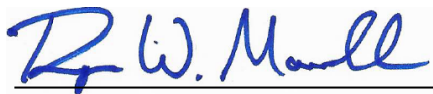
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United States Senator



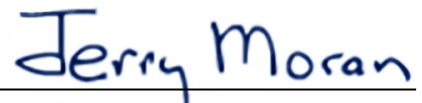
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