

Field Notes: AgriPolicy Brief

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The Roadless Rule

On July 23, 2025 Secretary Rollins announced that USDA will work to eliminate the 2001 Roadless Rule. The 2001 Roadless Rule is a regulatory law implemented by the Forest Service during the Clinton Administration. Currently, the rule prohibits the construction of roads through portions of the nation's national forests. In New Mexico, approximately 1.6 million acres are protected by this rule to preserve wild places and support wildlife, clean water, and backcountry recreation. Secretary Rollins outlined in her announcement of the Rule's repeal that rescinding this rule will remove prohibitions on road construction, reconstruction, and timber harvest on nearly 59 million acres of the National Forest System, allowing for fire prevention and responsible timber production.

In response to the announcement, Former USDA Undersecretary Robert Bonnie wrote in the New York Times outlining that while the rule could use an update, a full repeal of the measure will have drastic consequences for the undisturbed places in the US and more specifically in the West. Bonnie notes the repeal as a step backward, undermining decades of conservation progress and threatening habitats that are increasingly rare in an urbanizing society.

The Forest Service issued a notice of intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the proposed repeal, signaling formal engagement in the rulemaking process. The agency states that the repeal is a way to return decision-making authority to local forest managers and enable road construction and timber harvesting under site-specific plans. Public comments on the rule were accepted through September 19, 2025.

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Important Update on New World Screwworm

On August 25, 2025 the US confirmed its first human case of New World Screwworm. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirmed the case on Aug. 4 in a patient who had returned from travel to El Salvador. NPR has reported the full story. In response to the case, USDA has reaffirmed the Department is monitoring the situation and there have not been cases detected in US livestock since 2017.

Additional information on New World Screwworm can be found on page 4.



La Cosecha/ Agri-Cultura Cooperative Network
Albuquerque, NM
Photo Credit Helga Garcia-Garza



La Cosecha/ Agri-Cultura Cooperative Network
Albuquerque, NM
Photo by Helga Garcia-Garza

Solar Energy

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke L. Rollins alongside Tennessee Governor Bill Lee, Senator Marsha Blackburn, Senator Bill Hagerty, Representative John Rose, and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Deputy Secretary Stephen Vaden, announced USDA will no longer fund taxpayer dollars for solar panels on productive farmland or allow solar panels manufactured by foreign adversaries to be used in USDA projects. Subsidized solar farms have made it more difficult for farmers to access farmland by making it more expensive and less available. Within the last 30 years, Tennessee alone has lost over 1.2 million acres of farmland and is expected to lose 2 million acres by 2027. This problem is not just in Tennessee, since 2012, solar panels on farmland nationwide have increased by nearly 50%. That is why the Department is taking action.

New Mexico's agricultural landscape includes both small-scale, diversified farms and large ranching operations. The impact will vary depending on whether farmers were planning to use USDA programs like REAP for solar installations.

USDA Funding for Farm-to-School Programs

Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins announced on September 10 that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is making the largest single-year investment to date in a popular farm-to-school grant program, while streamlining the application process. This grant opportunity is open to state and local agencies, Tribes, child nutrition program operators, small- to medium-sized agriculture producers, groups of agricultural producers, and nonprofits. Detailed information about eligibility and application requirements can be found in the request for applications. Applications close on December 5, 2025.

The announcement failed to mention the USDA's earlier cancellation of the same program's 2025 funding, and experts say the money is unlikely to make up for other recent cuts making it harder for schools to source local food. The \$18 million announcement for 2026 follows the cancellation of \$10 million for the same program in March, which was funding that schools and organizations had already applied for.

More than half of American children are eating meals at school every day meaning that the American school system spends billions of dollars on food every year. While this seems like a great opportunity for local farmers to get their products into their local school system, the US has focused on purchasing the lowest cost foods which perpetuates a system of incentivizing farming operations to get bigger and produce more for less. The Farm to School programs have served as a tool to break this paradigm and allow schools to prioritize local foods over the cheapest foods. Some professionals have reported that students prefer the local foods taste and have noted that there is less food waste because the local foods are fresher upon arrival and have a longer shelf life.

New Mexico is a lead state in farm-to-school initiatives in rural, urban and tribal communities, from school gardens to greenhouses and adding farmers and ranchers fresh products to school meal programs For more information about the New Mexico Grown Program NM Grown Coalition - New Mexico Grown.

Join us in New Mexico for the National Farm to Cafeteria Conference, December 1 - 4, 2025 in Albuquerque! Here's information about the Farm to School Cafeteria Conference. If you are interested in a scholarship please apply or contact Farm to Table, pam@farmtotablenm.org or call 505-660-8403.



USDA Reorganization

On July 24, 2025, USDA issued a [Secretarial memorandum](#) outlining the reorganization plan. Six days later, [USDA Deputy Secretary Stephen Vaden testified](#) before the Senate Ag Committee on the reorganization plan. His testimony claims that USDA staffing and budgets have “exploded” in the last four years. Vaden goes on to say, in his written testimony, that “The prior administration not only burdened the taxpayer through questionable policymaking but also by hiring thousands of employees and maintaining a massive real estate footprint that USDA’s budget could not support. If any business or farm family managed its resources the way USDA did the prior four years, it would be bankrupt.”

While Deputy Secretary Vaden is correct that staffing numbers increased in the prior administration, compared to historical USDA data, staffing levels did not exceed historical highs or “explode”. According to a [blog post from the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition](#), USDA Staffing in September of 2024 was just shy of USDA staffing numbers from 2012. USDA staff was at its highest in 2001, over 25 years ago.

It is important to remember that these staffing levels include field offices that interact with farmers and ranchers on a daily basis, assisting with enrollment in insurance, conservation programs, and loans. USDA’s efforts to reduce staff size through the “Deferred Resignation Program” have already had devastating impacts. While exact figures aren’t available, most recent reports show that USDA staff has already been reduced by approximately 18%.

As with any Congressional Hearing, elected officials are able to submit “questions for the record” after the hearing concludes and the witness is required to respond. The hearing on USDA’s reorganization followed this pattern and [USDA published its responses on their website](#). In review of USDA’s responses, it is apparent that USDA staff have received little to no information on if this reorganization will impact them or if they will be required to move to keep their jobs.

Farmers across the country rely heavily on the USDA’s support, from financial assistance and crop insurance to technical guidance and market access. If USDA is unable to operate efficiently, farmers will struggle to recover from disasters, secure vital funds, or access the expertise needed to navigate an increasingly complex agricultural landscape. As commodity farmers head into a complex market situation and the need for USDA to intervene draws closer, USDA functioning efficiently has never been more important.

USDA is still accepting public comment through September 30, 2025.

USDA employees, members of Congress, agricultural and nutrition partners, and members of the general public can submit their comments by emailing reorganization@usda.gov.

Local Food Purchase Programs

Senate bill has been introduced with the aim to expand access to healthy food for families. Senators Reed (D - RI) and Justice (R-WV) have introduced S. 2338 “Strengthening Local Food Security Act of 2025”. At this time, no additional Senators have cosponsored the bill.

A companion bill was introduced in the House of Representatives on July 29, 2025 HR 4782 “Local Farmers Feeding our Communities Act” The House has 33 cosponsors on this bill including New Mexico’s Representative Gabe Vasquez.



Indigenous Farm Hub
Albuquerque, NM
Photo Credit Alan Bruer



Farm Aid 40



Farm Aid 40: Willie Nelson Performing with sons Lukas and Micah Nelson. Photo Courtesy of Ivy Jean Reynolds

On September 19, 2025, the Farm Aid Board of Directors, Willie Nelson, Neil Young, John Mellencamp, Dave Mathews, and Margo Price, performed at Farm Aid 40 at Huntington Bank Stadium along with many, many musical friends including the WISDOM Indian Dancers, Trampled by Turtles, Wynona Judd, and Kenny Chesney.

This marathon musical festival celebrated family farms throughout the nation and spoke of love, unity, and patriotism for the American Dream. Farm Aid was first held in 1985 in response to the Farm Financial Crisis of the 1980s. Willie Nelson, Neil Young, and John Mellencamp thought that this would be a one time festival however they have seen the need to continue to fight for the family farm. This festival reignited hope in many in a time of uncertainty.

NEW WORLD SCREWORM FLY UPDATES:

New World screwworm (NWS) is a devastating pest. When NWS fly larvae burrow into the flesh of a living animal, they cause serious, often deadly damage to the animal. NWS can infest livestock, pets, wildlife, occasionally birds, and in rare cases, people.

In 2023, NWS detections in Panama exploded from an average of 25 cases per year to more than 6,500 cases in 1 year. Since then, screwworm has been detected in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Mexico, north of the biological barrier that's successfully contained this pest to South America for decades.

On July 9, 2025 Secretary Rollins ordered the closure of livestock trade through southern ports of entry.

How to Identify Screwworm:

Adult screwworm flies are about the size of a common housefly (or slightly larger). They have orange eyes, a metallic blue or green body, and three dark stripes along their backs.

Report mammals and birds with the following signs:

- Irritated behavior
- Head shaking
- The smell of decay
- Presence of fly larvae (maggots) in wounds

Who is your Legislator?

Find your New Mexico State Representatives and Senators here: www.nmlegis.gov

Find your US Representative here: www.house.gov/representative/find-my-representative

Find your US Senators: www.senate.gov/senators/senators-contact.htm

Stay up to date: www.farmtotablenm.org/news