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**FACT SHEET:
BIG AGRIBUSINESS**

Capitol, Inc. Project

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

INTERNATIONAL CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY ROUNDTABLE

The International Corporate Accountability Roundtable (ICAR) is a civil society organization that believes in the need for an economy that respects the rights of all people, not just powerful corporations. We harness the collective power of progressive organizations to push governments to create and enforce rules over corporations that promote human rights and reduce inequality.



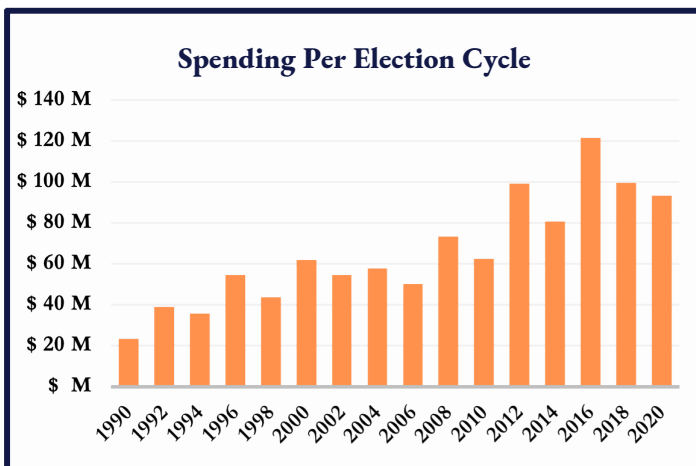
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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HOW BIG AG GETS WHAT IT WANTS

The vast majority of the food produced for American consumption doesn't come from family farms grounded in and accountable to their communities. From crop producers and dairy farmers to tobacco companies, agrichemical producers, and meat processors, almost every sector is dominated by a handful of large multinational corporations devoting billions to influencing government decisions, increasing their profits at the expense of smaller farms, workers' rights, public health, food safety, and the environment.

Election Spending

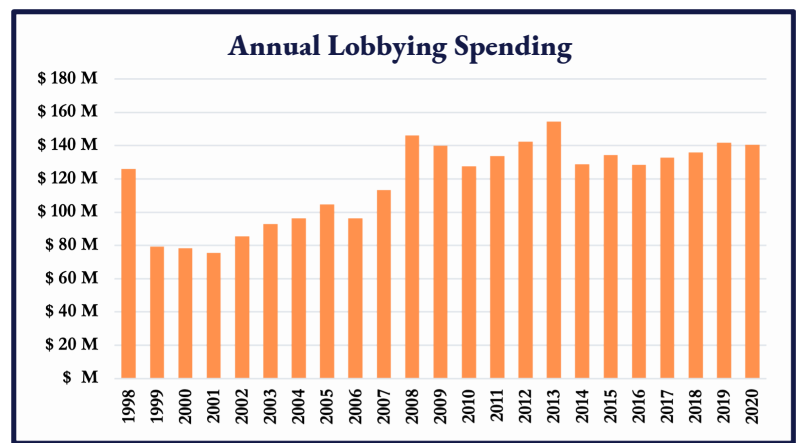


Data from OpenSecrets profile on [Agribusiness](#)

- Big agribusiness has spent more than **\$1.16 billion** influencing federal elections since 1990.
- Election spending in the last decade alone accounts for over **\$650 million** of that total.
- During the 2018 election cycle, the industry contributed over **\$10.6 million** to members of the **House** and **Senate** Agriculture Committees.

Lobbying

- Big agribusiness spent over **\$1.5 billion** dollars lobbying the federal government in just the last decade.
- In 2020 alone the industry spent **\$138.66 million** lobbying the federal government and had a total of **1,142 lobbyists**
- Industry lobbyists also **target officials** with industry ties for advocacy. For example, **“forty percent** of all government officials listed on the American Sugarbeet Growers' Association's (ASGA) lobbying disclosure forms that cover activity during the Trump administration have ties to the agribusiness industry.”



Data from OpenSecrets lobbying profile on [Agribusiness](#)

The Revolving Door

- At least [17 key officials](#) in Trump’s USDA and [8 high-level](#) officials in Obama’s USDA went through the revolving door with big Agribusiness.
- Under President George W. Bush, the USDA was so full of people drawn from the agribusiness industry that the agency was nicknamed “[USDA Inc.](#)” At least [12 key positions](#) in the agency were filled with people tied to agribusiness.
- There are many examples of [members of Congress](#) and [Congressional staffers](#) who have gone through the revolving door with big agribusiness. For example, former Rep. Dennis Cardoza (D-CA), who was a member of the House Agricultural Committee, “[quit Congress early](#)...to take a job as a lobbyist for agribusiness at twice his prior salary.”

EXAMPLES OF HARM

- *Powerful Meat Processing Companies & the USDA Collaborated to Protect Profits over Workers’ Lives and Public Health during the Pandemic.*

Early in the pandemic, meatpacking plants across the country quickly became [COVID-19 hotspots](#) after failing to invest [in adequate safety measures](#) to protect workers from the virus. As infection rates and deaths at these plants continued to [climb](#) throughout the spring, local governments and public health officials urged — and, in some cases, ordered — plants to [temporarily shut down](#). In response, meatpacking corporations and their trade groups [pressured the USDA](#) to intervene.

In a win for the industry, President Trump issued an [Executive Order](#) (EO) invoking the Defense Production Act (DPA) on April 28, 2020 declaring meatpacking plants “critical infrastructure” and “[forcing](#)” them to stay open. The EO did [not include](#) any mandatory safety measures to protect workers and was [strikingly similar](#) to a draft executive order that the North American Meat Institute (NAMI) had sent to top USDA officials the week before.

By February 24, 2021, [there were](#) 57,453 COVID-19 cases and 284 COVID-related deaths among meatpacking plant workers.

- *The USDA let pork and chicken processing plants increase their*

slaughter line speeds, putting workers at greater risk of injury, and threatening the safety of our food.

In 2018, the USDA’s Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS), which is responsible for protecting “[the public’s health](#)” by ensuring the safety of meat, poultry, and egg products,” implemented a [waiver system](#) to allow approved poultry processing plants to [increase](#) their slaughter line speeds from the normal maximum of 140 birds per minute (bpm) to 175 bpm—a change [previously rejected](#) as unsafe by [FSIS in 2014](#). The National Chicken Council had been [lobbying the USDA](#) for faster line speeds since at least 2017.

Using this new system, the USDA granted a record [15 waivers](#) in April 2020, further exacerbating the [safety risks](#) to workers in meat processing plants during the global pandemic. By the end of the Trump administration, FSIS had issued waivers to [54 poultry plants](#).

FSIS went even further for pork processing companies. In 2019 FSIS issued a [final rule](#) that established the New Swine Inspection System (NSIS), which completely eliminated limits on slaughter line speeds for hog plants. It also allowed them to replace some [USDA inspectors](#) on their slaughter lines with company employees, who are not required to have any training in food safety or regulatory compliance.

These changes represent real [financial benefits](#) to meat

and poultry production companies. For example, in 2019 Bloomberg reported that line speed increases under the NSIS could generate an additional **\$2 million in revenue** each year for an average-sized hog plant that implements them.

But it also means significant risks to both workers and consumers. Speed is a **key factor** in the already alarmingly **high rates** of serious injury and chronic illness for workers in meat production. Faster line speeds also mean less time to spot contaminants like “**feces, sex organs, toenails, bladders and unwanted hair**” and adequately test meat for consumer safety.

Civil society **analysis** has found that hog plants that participated in a pilot of the NSIS had, on average, nearly double the violations when compared to a similarly sized plant outside the program. While the rest of NSIS remains intact, the USDA’s elimination of pork line speed limits was **reversed** in 2021.

- ***After industry lobbying the EPA withdrew its proposal to ban agricultural use of chlorpyrifos, a neurotoxic pesticide that endangers farmworkers, children, and the environment.***

In November 2015, the EPA **moved to ban** the agricultural use of chlorpyrifos, a common pesticide used on at least **50 crops** like apples and almonds that is toxic to humans and threatens the existence of almost **1,400 endangered species**. A decade-long study of the chemical led EPA scientists to conclude “that exposure to chlorpyrifos posed an **unacceptable risk** to human health” and a 2016 EPA human health risk assessment for chlorpyrifos confirmed that there are **no safe uses** for the pesticide. The process for finalizing the ban at the EPA was **still underway** when President Obama left office.

Pesticide manufacturers and other agribusiness groups strongly **opposed** the ban. Dow Chemical, whose subsidiary Corteva Agriscience (formerly Dow AgroScience) sells around **5 million pounds** of chlorpyrifos in the U.S. annually, “**worked for years** to

prevent the E.P.A. from banning chlorpyrifos.”

During the Trump era, Dow redoubled its efforts to **influence** the EPA. Along with its allies, the chemical giant – which had **close ties** to the White House and donated **\$1 million** to help fund Trump’s inauguration – found a **sympathetic ear** in Trump’s EPA. In March 2017, new EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt **abruptly reversed** the EPA’s prior decision to ban chlorpyrifos, rejecting “**the scientific conclusion** of the agency’s own chemical safety experts” about the health and environmental risks associated with the chemical.

A New York Times investigation revealed that the USDA joined agribusiness in **lobbying against the ban**. In the lead-up to Pruitt’s decision, USDA officials “attended meetings between the EPA and chemical **agribusiness executives** and strongly pushed for the EPA to set aside other scientific evidence of the pesticide’s danger to human health.”

Wendy Cleland-Hamnett, an EPA staffer since 1979 and the agency’s top official overseeing pesticides and toxic chemicals at the time, told The New York Times that she saw “the **industry’s fingerprints** all over” the EPA’s 180-degree turn to reverse the proposed pesticide ban.

“It was extremely disturbing to me,” Ms. Hamnett said of the order. “The industry met with E.P.A. political appointees. And then I was asked to change the agency’s stand.” –New York Times, ***Why Has the E.P.A. Shifted on Toxic Chemicals? An Industry Insider Helps Call the Shots***

- ***Congress continues to line the pockets of large commercial farms with ongoing subsidies totaling over \$424 billion of taxpayers’ dollars since 1995.***

Despite the **overwhelming evidence** that U.S. farm subsidies are not in the **public interest**, the federal government has handed out **over \$424 billion** in subsidies to U.S. farms since 1995. The majority of these subsidies go to **large commercial farms** rather than small family farms.

One study found that over the last two decades, “the [top 10 percent](#) of farms account for 77 percent of commodity subsidies for a total of \$158 billion.” And [USDA data](#) show that [roughly half](#) of the federal subsidies in 2015 went to farmers with household incomes over \$150,000. While lining the pockets of big agribusiness, these subsidies cause significant harm to [consumers](#), [taxpayers](#), [small farmers](#), and the [environment](#).

Farm subsidies are primarily doled out through a package of legislation known as the [Farm Bill](#), which is passed roughly every five or six years. Over [600 groups and companies](#) hired lobbyists to advocate for them during the most recent [Farm Bill negotiations](#), including CropLife America, DowDupont, the International Dairy Foods Association, and Nestle. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, the 2018 Farm Bill – which allocated [billions of dollars](#) in farm subsidies - “has [lobbyists’ fingerprints](#) all over it, as is tradition.”

Key Senate-approved [amendments](#) to the Farm Bill did not make it into the final law, including one that would have lowered the cap on subsidies to high-income farms. “Today, we have a Farm Bill that is intentionally written to help the largest farmers receive unlimited subsidies from the federal government,” [said Senator Chuck Grassley](#) (R-Iowa) of the 2018 Farm Bill. “There is no other way to characterize what the conference committee has done.”

- ***On top of traditional subsidies, the Trump administration distributed \$47.2 billion in direct payments to U.S. farm operations through two new subsidy programs, which mainly benefited the largest and wealthiest farm businesses.***

While farm subsidies have stayed relatively consistent over the last decade, during the Trump administration they [skyrocketed](#). This sharp increase resulted from [two new farm subsidy programs](#) aimed at mitigating Trump’s trade war and the global pandemic.

Combined, these bailout programs provided [\\$47.2](#)

[billion](#) in direct payments to U.S. farming operations — on top of ongoing traditional subsidies. As with regular farm subsidies, the [biggest payouts](#) went to large, profitable commercial farms rather than smaller farms that need it the most. [Nearly all](#) the bailout funds went to white farmers

Under Trump’s Market Facilitation Program (MFP), the USDA’s Farm Services Agency (FSA) distributed [\\$23.2 billion](#) to farming operations between 2018 and 2020. The average white farmer received [ten times more](#) (\$10,674) than the average Black farmer (\$1,074) under the program.

The Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), announced in April 2020, initially included [\\$16 billion](#) in direct payments for crop and livestock farmers and ranchers, but by April 2021 [\\$24 billion](#) had been distributed under the program. USDA data shows that the average white farmer received [four times more](#) (\$3,398) than the average Black farmer (\$422).

Neither bailout program included provisions to protect farmworkers or improve their working conditions amid the pandemic. Instead, the administration sought ways to [cut farmworkers’ wages](#) to “provide [‘wage relief’](#) to U.S. farmers.” According to the [Environmental Working Group](#): “The American Farm Bureau Federation, which lauded Trump’s relief for farmers and had been calling for more bailout checks even before COVID-19 struck, defended the proposal to cut farmworker wages. A Farm Bureau executive told The Wall Street Journal it was “not right” to require farmers to pay the higher wage during a pandemic.”

- ***Processed food industry insiders held key roles overseeing national nutrition guidelines and the USDA rolled back nutrition standards for school lunch programs, prioritizing food industry interests over the health of over 29 million U.S. children.***

Under the Trump administration, key roles within the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) — an agency with [“sweeping influence](#) over how tens of billions of taxpayer dollars” are spent through federal

nutrition programs — were filled with [industry lobbyists](#) who maintained close ties to their former employers. For example, Secretary Perdue [appointed](#) National Grocers Association lobbyist [Maggie Lyons](#) to a prominent role within FNS and recruited [Kailee Tkacz](#), a processed food lobbyist, as a policy advisor. In August 2017, Lyons and Tkacz both received [ethics waivers](#) allowing them to help shape policies and programs they had previously lobbied on for their industry employers.

[Tkacz's waiver](#) explicitly allowed her to help oversee the development of the new Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) despite lobbying the USDA about the Guidelines on behalf of the Corn Refiners Association and SNAC International in 2016 and 2015, respectively. Several other [industry-connected officials](#) joined Tkacz in overseeing this process, including Lyons and former American Farm Bureau Federation lobbyist Kristi Boswell. Worse yet, the 20 members of the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee were [“nominated primarily by the food and beverage industry.”](#)

“For years, food policy experts have been concerned that the “go-to source” on healthy eating has failed to keep pace with nutrition science, often to the benefit of major food and beverage companies that wield considerable influence over the guideline setting process.” – From Civil Eats, [Questions Remain about Big Food's Influence on the New Dietary Guidelines](#)

Issued every five years, the DGAs are a [priority](#) for the food and beverage industry, which has spent [millions lobbying](#) “to shape the DGAs that favor the industry’s bottom line.” The development of the 2020 – 2025 DGAs was [no different](#). Even before the DGAC began its work, the USDA [limited the scope](#) of the guidelines in the industry’s favor (e.g., excluding the topic of red and processed meat consumption or the dramatic proliferation of ultra-processed foods). The [new DGAs](#) released in December 2020, [“looked almost identical](#) to the ones released five years earlier.” Although the DGAC’s report recommended lowering the [“recommended](#) daily sugar from 10 percent of one’s daily calories to 6 percent, as well as limiting alcohol consumption to one drink a day for both men

and women,” neither of these were included in the final 2020–2025 DGA.

The heavily conflicted FNS also [took aim at](#) the nutrition standards for federally subsidized meals served in schools under the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA), impacting [29.6 million children](#). Through a [December 2018 rule](#), FNS delayed the implementation of low-sodium limits, allowed schools to serve sugar-sweetened milk, and reverted to an earlier standard requiring [“only half](#) the grain products offered in school lunch program... to be whole grain-rich.” The [FNS claimed](#) these changes were necessary because schools were facing challenges incorporating the requirements, despite [USDA data](#) showing that, in 2016, [“more than 99 percent](#) of schools nationwide were meeting the new nutrition standards.”

- ***The USDA dismantled the office charged with policing powerful meat processing conglomerates that cheat & defraud farmers.***

America’s meatpacking and processing sector has long been [dominated](#) by a few large, powerful firms whose overwhelming market share [enables](#) them to unduly [influence](#) policies, [shape](#) market forces, control industry [pricing](#), and engage in [predatory practices](#).

In the early 1900s the five largest meatpackers — known colloquially as the [Big 5](#) — were infamous for [“manipulating](#) the market, defrauding consumers and farmers, and ‘profiteering.’” In response to [significant outcry](#) from farmers, reformers, and the public, in 1917 President Woodrow Wilson ordered the Federal Trade Commission to investigate the industry. Four years later, Congress passed the [Packers & Stockyards Act of 1921](#), which [“prohibited](#) meatpackers and processors from engaging in unfair and deceptive practices, manipulating prices, creating monopolies and engaging in other anti-competitive market behavior.”

In 1994 the federal government [established](#) the Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA) to enforce compliance with the Packers & Stockyards Act and, critically, to [protect farmers and ranchers](#) from predatory and

abusive practices. However, GIPSA's ability to enforce the Packers & Stockyards Act has been undermined over the course of its existence. The independent agency "was effectively shuttered" during the George W. Bush administration" and "dozens of farmer complaints against the meatpackers were found stuffed in a drawer."

USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue eliminated GIPSA as a standalone agency altogether and tasked the USDA's agribusiness-friendly Agricultural Marketing Service

(AMS) with enforcing the Packers & Stockyards Act — a shift announced in a November 2017 memo and formalized on November 30, 2018.

"AMS is the most corrupt and compromised agency in Washington D.C. and to subordinate Packers & Stockyards Act enforcement as a program of AMS is the death knell for antitrust enforcement in the meatpacking industry." - Fred Stokes, Tri-State Livestock News, Final Nail in the Coffin: USDA formally eliminates GIPSA.

THE SOLUTION

This fact sheet provides information about the outsized influence of one industry over our government decision-makers. But the Agribusiness industry's influence is just an illustrative example of a broader, cross-cutting problem. Outsized corporate influence exists across many industries, enabled by the same structural gaps and weaknesses. Countering corporate capture of the federal government will require significant reform covering a variety of issues ranging from campaign finance, government ethics rules, and lobbying disclosure, among others. As a starting place, the following legislation and policy solutions would help to ensure our government serves the public interest.

- Pass The Freedom to Vote Act: To ensure that our government works for us by ending the use of dark money and reducing the influence of big money in politics.
- Pass the Democracy for All Amendment: To overturn *Citizens United v. FEC* and give the power in elections back to people, not big business.
- Ban Corporate PACs: To protect elections from excessive corporate influence.
- Ban Contributions to Lawmakers from Entities Under Their Committees' Jurisdiction: To minimize perverse incentives in legislation by preventing conflicts of interest.
- Strengthen Federal Lobbying Disclosure Requirements: To unveil the corporate interests influencing legislators behind closed doors.
- Ban Lobbyists from Fundraising for Federal Candidates: To reduce the leverage that lobbyists have over our elected officials.
- Expand and Strengthen Revolving Door Provisions: To prevent conflicts of interest and restrain former government officials from exploiting their influence for corporate gain.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- *“When We’re Dead and Buried, Our Bones Will Keep Hurting”*: Workers’ Rights Under Threat in US Meat and Poultry Plants, Human Rights Watch (September 2019), [available here](#).
- *Captured: How Agribusiness Controls Regulatory Agencies and Harms Producers and Consumers*, Organization for Competitive Markets (August 2020), [available here](#).
- *Growing Influence: The Political Power of Agribusiness and the Fouling of America’s Waterways*, Environment Michigan Research & Policy Center (February 2011), [available here](#).
- *USDA Inc.: How Agribusiness Has Hijacked Regulatory Policy at the U.S. Department of Agriculture*, Phil Mattera, Good Jobs First (July 2004), [available here](#).
- *Facing Two Pandemics: How Big Food Undermined Public Health in the Era of COVID-19*, Global Health Advocacy Incubator (November 2020), [available here](#).
- *From Bureaucrats to Fat Cats: EPA Pesticide Program is a “Farm Team” for the Pesticide Lobby*, Environmental Working Group (June 1999), [available here](#).