

Veterinarians working on bird flu, pet food safety are fired in HHS purge

Among those laid off were employees in a center that has played a key role in the response to the bird flu outbreak, according to three FDA staffers.

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By [Rachel Rouben](#) and [Lena H. Sun](#)

Nearly half a dozen senior veterinarians at the Food and Drug Administration were laid off in a sweeping purge, including employees in a center that has played a key role in the recent bird flu outbreak that began rampaging through dairy herds for the first time last spring, according to three FDA staffers.

Some of the veterinarians laid off this week had helped design studies last year showing pasteurization kills the virus in milk found on store shelves, according to the three staffers who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly. More recently, some of the center's veterinarians providing leadership on the response have focused on determining the source of bird flu in raw pet food, which led to two recalls last month because of the potential for the products to be contaminated with H5N1. The cuts also ensnared staffers focused on communicating directly with the public, such as detailing how Americans can protect their pets from the virus, according to the staffers.

“Word has to get to people,” one staffer said. “If things happen behind the walls of government, and we’re not sharing it with the public then all the work that we do is not getting out so that people can take the steps they need to to protect themselves.”

The job cuts were part of massive upheaval at Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s Department of Health and Human Services this week, as senior leaders across various agencies learned they were being placed on administrative leave or offered reassignment and thousands of other employees lost their jobs. Workers were stunned by the sheer scope and scale of the layoffs, which HHS has billed as mostly impacting administrative positions, such as those working in human resources and information technology.

On Tuesday, Democratic leaders on the House Oversight Committee launched a probe into Kennedy’s handling of the bird flu outbreak, citing comments pushing to create immunity for birds that public health experts have decried.

“This is one of the dumbest things you could possibly do with your government, laying off the very people you need to combat one of the biggest problems affecting our food supply right now,” Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-Illinois) said in an interview.

HHS did not respond to a request for comment, but on Tuesday as the layoffs unfurled, Kennedy wrote on X that the overhaul was aimed at “realigning HHS with its core mission: to stop the chronic disease epidemic and Make America Healthy Again. It’s a win-win for taxpayers, and for every American we serve.”

Shockwaves reverberated throughout FDA’s Center for Veterinary Medicine Tuesday morning as news spread that experienced veterinarians were being cut — including those who work on the safety of pet food, prevention of chemical contamination in the food supply and measures to keep infection-causing bacteria from becoming resistant to drugs. Tristan Colonius, the agency’s chief veterinarian and co-lead on the FDA’s bird flu response, was among those let go. Other senior veterinarians were also part of the purge, including a senior leader who has worked at the veterinary medicine center for more than three decades.

Some in the veterinary community expressed concern over the widespread firings, while several staff described cuts so abrupt that they were unsure of who — and whether — there was anyone left to take over their work.

Sandra Faeh, the president of the American Veterinary Medical Association, said the group wants to work with Congress and the administration to ensure some positions and personnel across various agencies are restored.

“The AVMA works on a weekly basis with the very talented and dedicated veterinarians at the CVM on issues involving not only animal health, but also animal and human food safety, public health, and issues affecting international trade,” Faeh said in a statement to The Washington Post. “We are looking forward to continuing to work with the new FDA commissioner to ensure that this incredibly important expertise continues to be readily available and fully utilized.”

The Trump administration is grappling with its response to the bird flu outbreak that has hit the agriculture sector hard and caused egg prices to soar earlier this year, making it a priority for President Donald Trump’s health and economic agenda. The U.S. Department of Agriculture initially fired some probationary workers focused on the federal government’s response to the avian influenza outbreak but rescinded those terminations.

A few officials in the FDA veterinary medicine center impacted by the cuts have also been working with the USDA on efforts to develop novel therapies to treat sick poultry, according to three staffers.

The FDA’s human foods program also works on the bird flu response, and it’s unclear how much of that staff have been impacted. Most of the H5 bird flu response has remained intact at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which leads the response on tracking and preventing human infections, said multiple officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly. But four staff members working on H5 were laid off at CDC, including three who were trying to improve personal protective equipment for front-line workers exposed to H5N1 and other viruses. They were part of the center that researches and protects worker health, according to three CDC employees.

Since the bird flu outbreak was first noticed in dairy cattle a year ago, the virus has infected nearly 1,000 herds, spilled over into cats and other animals, and infected at least 70 people. Public health and industry experts are worried that continued spread of the virus into different species could increase the likelihood the virus could become more lethal and easily spread to humans. One Louisiana man with underlying medical conditions died in January after exposure to infected backyard poultry flocks. A Canadian teen was hospitalized with severe illness for two months and recovered.

The cuts at FDA also appear to impact disease response beyond bird flu.

At least two senior veterinarians laid off include those working on a new iteration of a [national action plan](#) to combat antimicrobial resistance, which is being done in conjunction with other federal health agencies and departments, according to the three staffers.

The under-the-radar issue can have huge consequences. Antimicrobial resistance occurs when drugs used to treat bacterial infections are no longer effective. When antimicrobial medicines are used in animals, it can contribute to the emergence of antimicrobial resistance to bacteria that can be transferred to people. Drug-resistant germs sicken nearly 3 million people every year in the United States and kill about 35,000, [according to the CDC](#).

Yet the issue has been on the radar of [Marty Makary](#), a Johns Hopkins surgeon and former Fox News contributor who was recently sworn in as Trump's FDA commissioner. In 2018, [Makary co-authored a paper](#) in the Journal of Antibiotics calling for doctors to recommend antibiotic-free foods.

"Just as physicians led an anti-smoking campaign to educate patients and communities, so too should we draw attention to the association between routine antibiotic use in animals and the declining efficacy of antibiotics in treating human infections," Makary wrote.

A day after the layoffs, the new commissioner held a welcome event with staff on Wednesday afternoon, where he gave introductory remarks to staff and aligned with Kennedy's Make America Healthy Again agenda to tackle chronic disease, according to two FDA staffers who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal. He did not take any questions.

Lauren Weber and Patrick Svitek contributed to this report.

What readers are saying

The comments express significant concern and criticism over the recent layoffs of senior veterinarians at the FDA, particularly in relation to the bird flu response. Many commenters view these layoffs as a dangerous move that could exacerbate public health risks, including the... [Show more](#)

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