

Worries grow over risks to Americans as Trump cuts health, safety agencies

The experts issuing warnings include Republican lawmakers, former Trump officials and civil servants who worked under GOP and Democratic presidents.

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By [Dan Diamond](#) and [Hannah Natanson](#)

Somewhere on a grocery shelf, or in a restaurant, or on a food-factory floor in America, lurk bacteria that haven't been detected yet. Perhaps *E. coli*, which is linked with food poisoning, or more of the *cronobacter* that led to infant illnesses, sparked a nationwide shortage of infant formula in 2022 and led to major reforms at the Food and Drug Administration.

The task of finding those bacteria rests on FDA inspectors, whose jobs have been mostly preserved amid the Trump administration's sweeping cuts to the federal government. But the people who help support those inspections haven't fared so well. More than 150 people in the FDA's Office of Inspections and Investigations — the staff responsible for purchasing supplies, managing trips and coordinating other administrative functions — were laid off last week, according to multiple federal officials. So were staff dedicated to food-safety policies and regulations, including an entire office that partnered with foreign countries to handle food-related disease outbreaks. Meanwhile, the FDA's top food safety official — a position created after the infant formula crisis — resigned in February, citing “indiscriminate” staffing cuts to his office.

The cuts tee up “the next infant formula crisis waiting to happen,” said one current FDA official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of fear of reprisal.

The FDA, which last week laid off its entire media affairs team, did not respond to a request for comment. The Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees the FDA, did not respond to a request for comment. A White House spokesman said that FDA and other health agencies underperformed during the covid-19 pandemic and that recent staffing changes were intended to make the agencies more “nimble and strategic.”

Across the government, President Donald Trump and his allies have sliced billions of dollars and tens of thousands of staff from agencies focused on health and safety, such as the FDA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration — cuts that are hollowing out longtime federal offices, shedding expertise, and appear to go against Trump's repeated campaign promises to make Americans healthier and safer. The experts issuing warnings about the cuts include career civil servants who worked under both GOP and Democratic presidents, Republican lawmakers and former Trump officials who held top positions in the president's first term.

Many said that the moves reflect a shifting of risk from the federal government to states and cities that have more limited resources to prepare for natural disasters, public health crises and other threats. They also predicted the cuts would place new burdens on average Americans, who might be faced with more uncertainty in their food supply — or less warning of a tornado or hurricane bearing down on them.

“Lives are at risk,” said Mary Glackin, who spent 35 years at NOAA, including serving as the agency’s top career official under the George W. Bush and Obama administrations. She pointed to delays on NOAA contracts to maintain radar systems, reductions in the launches of weather balloons and other pressures on her former agency as staffing shrinks. “It’s a mess ... if this continues, people will die from this, I’m sorry to say,” Glackin said.

The Trump administration has countered that its cuts are focused on reducing waste and that agencies are preserving the most crucial jobs such as food inspectors, air traffic controllers and other positions that have a direct effect on health and safety.

Kush Desai, a White House spokesman, said that Trump had received a “resounding mandate” to fix the “broken status quo” in federal agencies.

“Government bodies that oversee health and disaster relief have received hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars in recent years, yet America’s worsening chronic disease epidemic, incompetent handling of Hurricane Helene recovery efforts, and recent California wildfires show how these institutions continue to fail everyday Americans,” Desai wrote in a statement. “The Trump administration is committed to taking a long-term approach to address issues like chronic diseases and disaster resilience — to tackle our problems before they affect and ruin people’s lives, not after.”

While federal leaders have rushed to hire back officials who work in sensitive areas such as nuclear safety, or have asked some fired workers at the FDA and other agencies to temporarily keep working, the response has been inconsistent, and even top Trump appointees have struggled to understand and communicate the administration’s plans. Some of the abrupt cuts overseen by Elon Musk and his U.S. DOGE Service have blindsided political leaders, who learned about staffing and contract changes at their agencies only by reading news reports.

HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. on Thursday said that some laid-off personnel at the nation’s health agencies would be “reinstalled” and that “20 percent” of the DOGE-driven cuts were inevitably going to be “mistakes.” But Kennedy has not announced plans to rehire laid-off workers, and Politico reported Friday that there is no plan to do so. HHS did not respond to a request for comment about Kennedy’s remarks.

Others have called for a more deliberate approach to overhauling the federal government. Pete Gaynor, who served as FEMA administrator in the first Trump administration, said he was not opposed to possible cuts and changes at his old agency — but that moving too swiftly now could create longer-term problems for national disaster response. Federal officials are working on plans to unwind FEMA’s responsibilities and shift many of them to the states, even as local officials warn they’re not ready to assume a larger role in responding to disasters.

“Hurricane season is 60 days away. You still have the [FEMA] mission to provide disaster survivors with all the resources that the nation can bear in a disaster,” Gaynor said. “So let’s let them do that job, and then let’s figure out a longer runway to land a FEMA reform. We can do two things at the same time.”

The responsibility of investing in risk-preparedness has frequently rested with the federal government, given its scope and authorities. Political leaders also have pursued major new investments after crises such as Hurricane Katrina and the covid-19 pandemic, with lawmakers lamenting past cuts and vowing to be better prepared for the next emergency. But many programs started after crises have become targets of budget cuts themselves, as memory of the last disaster recedes, a frequent cycle in emergency planning-and-response.

In an interview, Juliette Kayyem, a Harvard Kennedy School of Government professor and a former Homeland Security official in the Obama administration, underscored the concept of “the preparedness paradox — the better we do in preparedness planning, the harder it is to justify that investment.”

The rush to cut federal spending has meant that second-term Trump officials are sometimes castigating programs begun and personnel hired by their first-term predecessors.

FEMA last week ended a hazard-mitigation program, known as Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities, that was started by the first Trump administration. The initiative had made more than \$5 billion available since 2020 to help local projects that reduce the effect of disasters. But the Trump administration on Friday called it “yet another example of a wasteful and ineffective FEMA program” and announced plans to claw back funds distributed to states.

Daniel Kaniewski, whom Trump nominated as FEMA’s deputy administrator in 2017 and helped oversee the creation of the BRIC program, said he didn’t “see a rationale” to end the initiative. He also warned that states have grown dependent on the federal government to respond to and recover from natural disasters, and the BRIC program represented an effort to encourage states to pursue their own investments.

“The federal government was providing a relatively small amount ... but it was a strong incentive for state and local governments to invest in resilience,” Kaniewski said.

Meanwhile, the FDA is preparing to reduce the several dozen food inspections per day it conducts across the United States, given its staffing shortages, officials said. The agency was already running behind its federal targets, according to a Government Accountability Office report released in January — before the Trump administration took office — that called on the FDA to ramp up its inspection efforts. CBS News first reported plans to reduce FDA inspections.

Melinda Plaisier, who oversaw FDA’s inspections under the Obama and first Trump administrations, said she and her former colleagues are worried that there will be too few people ready to respond to — or better, prevent — public health emergencies.

The staff “was the beating heart of the agency. It was the eyes and ears, the boots on the ground ... day in and day out, all across the country, trying to protect public health,” Plaisier said. “My biggest concern, will there be sufficient trained people, with the support they need, to keep us safe? To make sure that all those products in your refrigerator are safe?”

The FDA last week also hollowed out other offices, such as terminating staff within the Office of Policy and International Engagement, which helped identify the sources of tainted food and manage the aftermath. When dozens of people in eight states began getting sick from eating papayas in 2018, the office used its existing international relationships to help pinpoint Mexican fruit — and salmonella — as the cause, said an FDA employee who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the news media. It is no longer clear who within the FDA would communicate with foreign food scientists should an outbreak occur, the employee said.

At NOAA, which is overseen by the Commerce Department, staff said they were worried the Trump administration's push for firings, resignations and retirements has left many local weather forecasting offices understaffed across the country.

In the central region, about a quarter of the forecasting offices now lack a senior meteorologist to lead their team, said the employees, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the news media. One office in Little Rock has lost more than a third of its staff of meteorologists, they said.

Those offices are supposed to be staffed 24/7 with meteorologists who watch local weather patterns and issue warnings.

“It means that forecasts will be less accurate, that mistakes are more likely to be made,” one of the employees said. “In the worst-case scenario, the warning won't go out in time or will be less accurate — people and their property will be in danger.”

NOAA's National Weather Service last month also suspended or reduced launches of weather balloons in 11 locations, citing a lack of staff. One of those locations was in Nebraska, worrying local lawmakers.

“The ripple effect resulting from a loss of this data could be significant with unintended consequences on local communities and run counter to the Administration's commitment to keep America safe,” Rep. Don Bacon (R-Nebraska) wrote to Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick on Wednesday.

NOAA did not respond to a request for comment.

Anna Phillips contributed to this report.

What readers are saying

The comments express significant concern over the potential risks to public health and safety due to staffing cuts at agencies like the FDA and NOAA under President Trump's administration. Many commenters criticize these cuts as reckless and dangerous, suggesting they could lead... [Show more](#)

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