

The Honorable John Thune
Senate Majority Leader
United States Senate
511 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Senate Minority Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

January 14, 2025

Dear Leader Thune and Leader Schumer,

We write to ask you to oppose the confirmation of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). In addition to his lack of credentials and experience in medicine, Mr. Kennedy's promise to overhaul the nation's food system renders him unfit to lead HHS.

Many of the tenets of Mr. Kennedy's vision for the future of food in America will fall under the jurisdiction of other agencies. However, with oversight of HHS, and more specifically the Food and Drug Administration, Mr. Kennedy would have the capacity to enforce regulations with profound consequences for U.S. agriculture. Mr. Kennedy has proposed to limit the use of pesticides shown to be safe, curb agricultural biotechnology innovation, and reassess genetically modified crops that farmers have relied on for decades. Such changes risk incentivizing less productive, less profitable, and more environmentally destructive farming practices that will upend the livelihoods of American farmers, increase food prices for American consumers, and compromise the competitiveness of U.S. agriculture globally.

Mr. Kennedy has called pesticides widely used in U.S. agriculture "poison" and vowed to "revisit pesticide and other chemical-use standards." An overhaul of pesticide regulations that limits the tools U.S. producers can use will leave farmers vulnerable to increasing pest and disease pressures. While EPA is largely responsible for regulating pesticides, Mr. Kennedy could restrict their use by more strictly enforcing residue limits, imposing inordinate testing requirements, and pressuring EPA to deny new pesticide registrations or revoke existing approvals for products like glyphosate. Despite Mr. Kennedy's claims, EPA under the previous Trump administration found no risks to public health from the current registered uses of glyphosate¹. USDA testing consistently finds that over 99% of sampled foods have pesticide residue levels below EPA's tolerance levels². Further, the European Commission renewed the approval of glyphosate in 2023 after finding no scientific evidence of harmful effects on human health or the environment³. Modern pesticides are an integral part of maintaining agricultural yields in the face of growing pest concerns. They are tailored to specific crops, regions, and pests, and when used alongside precision agriculture practices, have targeted delivery systems that reduce overall use and secondary consequences for local ecosystems.

Mr. Kennedy has also expressly stated his goal is to transform U.S. farming into an "organic, regenerative agriculture" system. On his podcast, he called "genetically modified organisms, and the use of new technologies to create them, very dangerous." As Secretary of HHS, Mr. Kennedy would have the power to prioritize regulatory initiatives, such as expanded safety assessments, that slow-roll biotechnology

¹ <https://www.epa.gov/pesticides/epa-takes-next-step-review-process-herbicide-glyphosate-reaffirms-no-risk-public-health>

² <https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/2023PDPAnnualSummary.pdf>

³ https://food.ec.europa.eu/plants/pesticides/approval-active-substances-safeners-and-synergists/renewal-approval/glyphosate_en

innovation or curb the use of existing genetically modified (GM) crops and livestock. Such efforts have significant downside risks. The vast majority of U.S. corn, soybeans, and cotton are GM—more than 90% for each. The global adoption of GM seeds has allowed for an increased output of 330 million tons of soybeans and 595 million tons of corn since 1996⁴. In the absence of GM seeds, the world would have otherwise needed to convert more than 23 million hectares of extra land to farmland—a land area larger than the State of Minnesota⁵. Turning back the biotechnology clock on agriculture would lower yields, increase crop prices, and increase global land-use for agriculture. In turn, this would threaten biodiversity and likely have significant impacts on food security. In the U.S., it would assuredly raise food prices while making farms less profitable by increasing labor costs and use of other inputs.

Furthermore, biotechnology developers are facing new uncertainty following a U.S. district court decision that threw out a set of 2020 regulations governing plant biotechnology reviews. As USDA reckons with the vacated rule this year, it is important for FDA to remain a reliable counterpart to USDA in implementing a risk- and science-based coordinated framework for biotechnology. Quite the opposite, instating Mr. Kennedy to oversee FDA would further compound regulatory uncertainty for products developed using genetic improvement technologies, setting our nation on the back foot when it comes to addressing issues like food security and sustainability in agriculture.

Mr. Kennedy intends to jeopardize the availability of safe and affordable agricultural products like pesticides and those developed with genetic improvement technologies by weaponizing regulatory agencies such as HHS. Should his vision become a reality, the U.S. should expect to grapple with declines in agricultural productivity for the first time in decades, and risk ceding its role as the world's leading food exporter to competitors like Brazil, China, and Russia.

These concerns are not hypothetical. In April 2021, Sri Lanka banned synthetic agricultural chemicals like pesticides and ordered farmers to go organic⁶. The chaos that followed demonstrates what a full scale shift to low-productivity agriculture might look like in the U.S. Within months of Sri Lanka's chemical input ban, agricultural yields plummeted by more than 50%, food prices skyrocketed, exports of crops like tea flatlined, and social tensions erupted⁷. In a matter of months, Sri Lanka's government reversed the ban, but the damage in terms of food price inflation, economic turmoil and food security was longlasting. The Sri Lanka chemical ban was influenced by Vandana Shiva, whom Mr. Kennedy has called a "hero".

Given his stated vision for the future of food and farming, placing Mr. Kennedy at the head of HHS could wreak havoc on U.S. agriculture. By hamstringing technological advances and crucial inputs key to the maintenance of U.S. agricultural abundance and global competitiveness, he will make life harder for agricultural producers, decrease food production, and increase food prices for American consumers. We strongly urge you to vote against his confirmation as Secretary of HHS.

Sincerely,
The Breakthrough Institute

⁴ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9397136>

⁵ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9397136/>

⁶ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/05/sri-lanka-organic-farming-crisis/>

⁷ <https://www.eu-asean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Sri-Lanka-Inputs-Ban-Research-Report-Oct-2022-Update-Photo.pdf>