



The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future
Bloomberg School of Public Health
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Members of the United States Senate

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed herein are our own and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Johns Hopkins University.

Dear Members of the U.S. Senate,

We are researchers based at the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, an interdisciplinary academic center at the Bloomberg School of Public Health that investigates the interconnections among food systems, public health and the environment. The Center engages in research, policy analysis, education, and other activities guided by an ecologic perspective that diet, food production, the environment, and public health are interwoven elements of a complex system.

As you know, the Senate Agriculture Committee held a hearing on March 23 for President Trump's nominee for Secretary of Agriculture, Governor Sonny Perdue. We are writing to express our concerns with the confirmation of Perdue for this role because of his conflicts of interest, denial of climate change, and efforts to undermine food safety and local control while Governor of Georgia. We believe that Perdue would threaten the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) progress in the promotion of food safety and the implementation and enforcement of regulations that protect public health and the environment.

Perdue's actions related to food safety and local control over agriculture while Governor of Georgia may forecast some of the positions he would take if confirmed as Secretary of USDA. In 2004, during his first term, Perdue cut Georgia's food safety and inspection unit funding by nearly one third (1). In 2006, a *Salmonella* outbreak from peanut butter produced at a Georgia plant sickened 628 people; in 2008, a similar outbreak killed nine people and sickened 714 more (2). During a hearing before the United States House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Georgia's Deputy Agriculture Commissioner at the time indicated that the Department had not had adequate funding to complete all of the required inspections of food production sites (3), potentially leading to the unsanitary conditions that caused the *Salmonella* contamination and outbreak. Only after the second outbreak did Perdue take action, funding a pathogen testing facility in Georgia. Perdue's initial decision to slash funding for food safety measures and delayed response following two major outbreaks in his State do not inspire confidence that he would take action to reduce the burden of foodborne illness and strengthen USDA's food safety efforts—including the Food Safety and Inspection Service, a public health agency responsible for testing meat, poultry, and egg products—were he to be confirmed as Secretary.

Perdue also revoked local control over agriculture and promoted the expansion of industrial food animal production while Governor of Georgia. He signed House Bill 529, the Landowner Protection Act, which prohibits local governments from adopting any regulation of crop management or animal husbandry practices. This type of state preemption of local authority may prevent citizens from addressing the air quality, water quality, and community impacts of industrial food animal production operations (4).

During his time as the Governor of Georgia, Perdue oversaw the nation's largest chicken producing state (5), as well as the consolidation and concentration of the poultry industry (6). Governor Perdue also sought the expansion of industrialized poultry production. Perdue Farms (no relation to the Governor) announced the significant expansion of their operations in two of the state's counties, investing over \$155 million to increase the capacity of existing plants, introduce new facilities, and establish 500 new poultry houses during his governorship (7). Governor Perdue's loyalty to agribusiness is demonstrated in his campaign contributions. During his seven political campaigns in Georgia, he received a total of \$328,328 in contributions from agribusiness interests, including \$104,470 from the poultry and egg industry (8). Governor Perdue's close ties to and support of the poultry industry—coupled with his lack of initiative to reform an industry that exploits farmers, harms the environment, and endangers public health—provide reason to believe he will remain tied to his own interests rather than act on behalf of the public and small farmers.

Governor Perdue's conflicts of interest extend to the energy sector as well. He opposed the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's efforts to cut greenhouse gas emissions during his tenure as Governor of Georgia (9), and has since called into question the scientific evidence behind climate change (10). Campaign contribution records showing significant donations from the oil and gas industry, a total of \$286,750 (11), signal that Governor Perdue's climate change denial may be rooted in more than just a lack of scientific understanding.

The leader of USDA's position on climate change is important not only because of the significant role agriculture plays in the problem, contributing more global greenhouse gas emissions than the entire transportation sector (12), but also because of the likely adverse impacts of climate change on agriculture. From rising sea levels, warming temperatures, and alterations in precipitation to increasing severity, frequency, and duration of heat waves, droughts, flooding and severe weather events, climate change threatens human health and safety, both directly and through the negative effects on agriculture, nutrition, and food safety and security (13). Climate change is anticipated to disrupt agriculture and fisheries, important sectors of our economy, through a wide variety of mechanisms that make it more difficult to grow crops, produce food animals, and catch fish (14). These disruptions can negatively impact food availability, access, and quality in the U.S. and globally, and potential food shortages can lead to rising domestic food prices, humanitarian crisis, and national security concerns (14). If the USDA Secretary is unable to mitigate, prepare for, and address these concerns due to industry ties and personal beliefs, American agriculture, health, and safety will be put at risk.

Finally, we are concerned about Governor Perdue's violation of state ethics laws and self-interested legislative efforts while Governor of Georgia. Mr. Perdue reportedly accepted gifts

and campaign contributions that exceeded state limits and signed a state tax bill that saved him, personally, about \$100,000 in taxes (15). His personal lawyer was a member of the Georgia House of Representatives at the time and advocated to make the new tax law apply retroactively, presumably to benefit Governor Perdue. These violations and conflicts of interest cast doubt on Governor Perdue's ability to lead ethically one of the largest federal agencies, with a budget of about \$140 billion a year.

Governor Perdue's failure to protect food safety and health, conflicts of interests throughout his political career, and positions on matters related to health, the environment, and climate change all call into question his ability to lead a department charged with administering food safety and nutrition programs and agricultural support and regulations. We urge you to consider the concerns presented here in your decision to confirm Governor Perdue as USDA Secretary. Please do not hesitate to contact us at (410) 502-7578 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

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