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# Food safety leaders express concerns about recent cuts in FDA workforce

by CORAL BEACH



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### — OPINION —

The Department of Government Efficiency has cut staff at the Food and Drug Administration, including employees in food safety roles.

Following the cuts, Deputy Commissioner for Human Foods Jim Jones resigned his post citing the cuts as being indiscriminate and endangering the lives of the American public.

Before the layoffs, the FDA had 18,000 employees across all 50 states. That number includes staff responsible for reporting on food recalls and the investigation of foodborne illness outbreaks.

Today we hear from food safety thought leaders about the impact of the FDA layoffs.

**MIKE TAYLOR** — is board member emeritus of STOP Foodborne Illness, which supports and represents victims of foodborne illness and their families. He served from 2010 to 2016 as FDA's Deputy Commissioner for Foods and Veterinary Medicine, where he led the implementation of the Food Safety Modernization Act of 2011 (FSMA). He previously served at the FDA as Deputy Commissioner for Policy (1991-94) and at the USDA as Administrator of the Food Safety and Inspection Service and Acting Under Secretary for Food Safety (1994-96).

“FDA is already struggling to implement FSMA's mandated shift from reaction to prevention of foodborne illnesses, having received less than half of the new funding the Congressional Budget Office said FDA would need. Any staff cuts in inspection or scientific staff only further delays the protection consumers rightfully expect. More people will get sick.

“FDA has been unable to invest in the true, efficiency-enhancing food safety partnership with the states FSMA envisioned. Further weakening FDA, whether on microbiological or chemical safety, further fractures the food safety system among 50 states and harms both consumers and the food industry.

“The US imports 90 percent of its seafood, 60 percent of its fresh fruit, and 35 percent of its vegetables, yet conducts maybe 10 percent of the foreign food inspections FSMA mandates. Cutting FDA staff only undermines consumer confidence in these crucial parts of the American diet.”

**FRANK YIANNAS** — was the deputy commissioner for food policy and response at the Food and Drug Administration, a position he assumed in December of 2018 and held through early 2022. There he was the principal advisor to the FDA commissioner in the development and execution of policies related to food safety, including implementation of the landmark FDA Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA).

“Like others, I've been watching the cut-backs at several federal agencies including the US FDA. Having spent much of my career in the private sector, unfortunately, the occasional cutback in workforce is something many in industry have had to deal with and experience.

“While my heart and thoughts go out to the dedicated men and women at FDA and I have compassion for anyone losing their job, let’s hope the cut-backs are being done judiciously and with insights into where the cuts make sense and where they do not. I also hope the cutbacks don’t serve as a hindrance in our ability to recruit future talent at the agency.

“But let me offer a bit of a contrarian view. With every challenge comes opportunities. And while cutbacks are always distressing and they should be taken seriously and executed with precision, they do also serve as an opportunity to work smarter and more efficient on behalf of the American people.

“While I worked in federal service, I saw the tendency for the government to want to hire people for every issue that came their way. In contrast, based on my private sector experience, not all work was viewed as a need to hire more full-time-equivalents. Sometimes, it was about implementing more efficient processes or arming the staff with new tools and smarter ways of working.

“For example, during my tenure at the US FDA, lines of imported seafood were increasing exponentially. Rather than try to address it the old-fashioned way, by just hiring more people, we launched a seafood AI pilot (under our Smarter Food Safety initiative) that ultimately showed we could increase our predictive capability of which seafood shipments contained violative products by a whopping 300%. The initiative was never meant to eliminate jobs, but rather to ensure the work was more data-driven, predictive, and efficient. It did, however, help change the paradigm from one of simply adding more people to screen lines of imported food shipments at ports to one of leveraging better tools, data, and technology to make the jobs of inspectors more effective and efficient.

“The work of the FDA is critical to the nation. Therefore, I hope we strike the right balance, but default to one where I believe arming the dedicated men and women at FDA with data, new tools and, more modern ways of working is the goal – Smarter Food Safety – than simply trimming jobs.”

**THOMAS GREMILLION** — since 2015, Gremillion has overseen the research, analysis and advocacy for the Consumer Federation of America's food policy activities. He also monitors food safety activities at USDA, FDA and in Congress, where he advocates for strong food safety protections for consumers.

“Staffing on the food side at FDA has been flat since 1978, while the U.S. population has grown by over 100 million people. The infant formula debacle catalyzed a much-needed reorganization of the FDA foods program, which also sought to address growing, widespread skepticism about the chemicals FDA has allowed in food. With the “Make American Healthy Again” campaign, this skepticism and calls for more aggressive regulation of chemicals like Red Dye No. 3 in food became bipartisan. FDA responded by hiring new staff to evaluate food additives on the market, and ensure the safety of products like infant formula. But now Elon Musk’s DOGE has fired those new ‘probationary’ employees, only to rehire an undisclosed number of them a few days later, while telegraphing massive staffing cuts to come. In the meantime, the Administration is still muzzling agency employees with a communications ‘pause.’

“You don’t need an advanced degree in organizational psychology to understand the likely impact of this chaotic attack on FDA’s highly skilled, expert workforce. The agency has struggled to attract many of its best employees with comparatively lower salaries than they could earn in the private sector. These employees typically viewed FDA employment as a financial sacrifice in exchange for serving the greater good.

They may soon be running for the doors, if they are not already, and the safety and quality of our food supply will likely suffer as a result.”

**DARIN DETWILER** — is founder and president of Detwiler Consulting Group, LLC, is the director of the MS in Regulatory Affairs of Food and Food Industry and Professor of Food Policy at Northeastern University in Boston. In addition to serving as the executive vice president for public health at the International Food Authenticity Assurance Organization.

“Since the tragic loss of four children, including my son Riley, in 1993 due to an E. coli outbreak, approximately 3,000 Americans have died each year from foodborne illnesses. This equates to nearly 100,000 lives lost over the past 32 years. Each of these deaths represents a family forever changed, holding onto hope that our federal response would strengthen to ensure safer food for future generations — not put us in greater risk.

“The recent staff reductions at the FDA threaten to undermine progress in food safety. The resignation of Jim Jones, head of the FDA’s Human Foods Program, in protest of these “indiscriminate” staff cuts, further exacerbates these concerns.

“Such reductions not only hinder the FDA’s ability to prevent foodborne illnesses but also disproportionately endanger our most vulnerable populations — children, the elderly, pregnant individuals, and those with compromised immune systems. Historically, robust food safety measures have been upheld as a non-negotiable priority, reflecting a commitment to safeguarding public health. Budget cuts in this area risk treating these populations as expendable, undermining public trust and well-being.

“Investing in food safety is not merely a regulatory obligation; it is an essential commitment to the health and security of our nation. The lessons from past tragedies compel us to advocate for sustained support and resources for the FDA.

“Only through unwavering dedication to stringent food safety protocols can we ensure that everyone has access to safe and nutritious food, thereby honoring the memory of those we’ve lost and protecting future generations from similar heartbreak.”

**DON SCHAFFNER** — is the Department Chair, a Distinguished Professor at Rutgers University, and Extension Specialist in Food Science. Schaffner has served on a variety of expert committees, including service to U.S. National Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Food Technologists, and U.S. National Advisory Committee on Microbial Criteria for Foods.

“I think that Jim Jones said it well in his resignation letter when he called these layoffs ‘indiscriminate.’ I also appreciated the comment from James Shehan, a lawyer who works on FDA issues. Shehan compared these cuts to trying to trim the fat off a steak using a sledgehammer.

“Laying off the most junior individuals from the agency does at least two things. First, it creates a gap in the pipeline so that we may not have the expertise we need to deal with unexpected food safety problems in the future. Second, it sends a discouraging message to talented young scientists who had hoped to make a career in government service.

“These layoffs may not have an immediate effect on food safety but the long-term effect certainly will not be good. I’m especially concerned that this action along with other similar cuts at CDC and USDA as well as terminating the National Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Criteria for Foods, will begin to create perfect storm scenarios where we will miss outbreaks, not have the adequate resources to fully investigate outbreaks, and not have the tools and resources to prevent similar outbreaks in the future.”

**BRIAN RONHOLM** — is the Director of Food Policy for Consumer Reports. He leads CR’s advocacy efforts to advance a safe and healthy food system. Ronholm is the former deputy under secretary of food safety at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. During his time at USDA, Ronholm developed strategic frameworks and engaged in outreach activities to advance Food Safety and Inspection Service policies and initiatives impacting the meat, poultry, and processed egg industries.

“The recent [article](#) in Consumer Reports by my colleague Laura Kirchner was alarming to read. Current FDA staff people indicated to CR anonymously that many critical food safety functions at the agency had ceased or dramatically slowed because of a spending freeze in effect.

“These FDA employees explained that they feel dangerously unprepared for any new, urgent food outbreaks, and further warned that all food testing could stop if the situation continues and their ability to protect consumers from unsafe food would be

diminished. Between the loss of staff and the lack of supplies and research, “we can’t protect the American public well,” one current FDA scientist declared.

“It’s widely acknowledged among food policy stakeholders that the food side of the FDA has been chronically underfunded for decades. As such, any additional cuts would be destructive and exacerbate an already bad situation, resulting in even fewer inspections and reduced testing capabilities.

“The alarm has to be sounded because we’re facing a deeply troubling situation. A coalition of industry, consumer, and public health stakeholder groups is trying, having recently written a letter to HHS Secretary Kennedy urging him to resist additional cuts to resources and staff that are critical to the FDA foods program. Otherwise, as former FDA deputy commissioner for food Mike Taylor warned, “It’s like another dagger to the capacity of the agency, and it will have lasting consequences.”

**CARTIER ESHAM**— Alliance for a Stronger FDA, Executive Director.

“Our members have expressed concerns about the collective impact of recent activities from the Administration may have on FDA’s workforce. We represent a broad community of patient and consumer advocates, food and animal companies and medical product companies. We know how difficult it can be to recruit and retain top scientific and medical talent that are necessary for the agency to review innovative products, ensure food safety and improve the health of our citizens.

“We share the goal of having a federal government that is effective, efficient, can protect the public and advance innovation. We are committed to working with the Administration and Congress to ensure the FDA maintains the level of resources needed and is provided the flexibility necessary to achieve those goals.”

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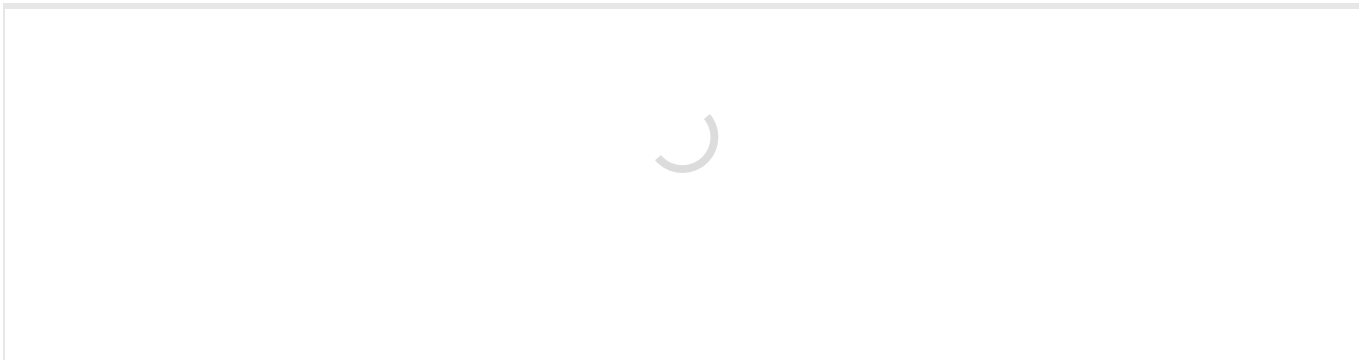
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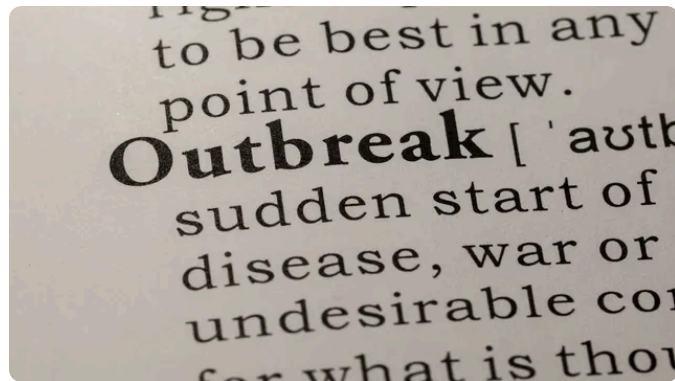
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