



July 6, 2020

VIA EMAIL

Alexis R. Graves
Departmental FOIA Officer
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
South Building
Room 4104
Washington, DC 20250-0706
Email: USDAFOIA@ocio.usda.gov

Re: Expedited Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear FOIA Officer:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the implementing regulations of your agency, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, and the disease it causes, COVID-19, has been declared a public health emergency at both the national and international levels.¹ Since late 2019, the virus has spread across the globe, sickened millions of people, and resulted in nearly 500,000 deaths.² This is a rapidly evolving situation that is demanding coordinated attention and action across the federal government, and cooperation with state and local officials.

As the country has struggled with personal protective equipment (PPE) shortages for essential workers,³ COVID-19 outbreaks in meat processing plants,⁴ and other disruptions to normal

¹ *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Summary*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/summary.html>.

² *Coronavirus Map: Tracking the Global Outbreak*, N.Y. Times (June 25, 2020, 8:24 AM), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/world/coronavirus-maps.html>.

³ See, e.g., Martha Mendoza & Kimberlee Kruesi, *Nurses Push Back on Pressure to Work Without Right Equipment*, Wash. Post, Apr. 16, 2020,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/nurses-suspended-for-refusing-covid-19-care-without-n95-mask/2020/04/16/dc0428ce-7f99-11ea-84c2-0792d8591911_story.html;

Rachel Lerman & Nitasha Tiku, *Amazon, Instacart Workers Launch May Day Strike to Protest Treatment During the Coronavirus Pandemic*, Wash. Post (May 1, 2020, 5:14 PM),

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/05/01/amazon-instacart-workers-strike/>; Liz Crampton, *USDA Leaves Meat Inspectors Hunting for Safety Gear*, Politico (Apr. 22, 2020, 5:20 PM), <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/22/usda-meat-inspectors-safety-gear-201717>.

⁴ See, e.g., Alex Gangitano, *Food Supply Worries Grow After Outbreak Closes Smithfield Meat Plant*, The Hill (Apr. 14, 2020, 6:00 AM) <https://thehill.com/business-a-lobbying/business-a-lobbying/492625-food-supply-worries-grow-after-outbreak-closes>; Danielle Wiener-Bronner, *Tyson Warns More Meat Plant Closures Are Coming*, CNN Business, May 4, 2020,

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/04/business/tyson-meat-plant-closures/index.html>; Mike Dorning, *Thirty Workers, Four USDA Inspectors Dead Amid Meat Plant Coronavirus Outbreaks*,



supply chains,⁵ individuals in the public and private sectors have raised concerns about potential food shortages.⁶

American Oversight seeks records with the potential to shed light on your agency's analysis of and response to potential food shortages.

Requested Records

American Oversight seeks expedited review of this request for the reasons identified below and requests that your office produce the following records as soon as practicable, and at least within twenty business days:

All emails communications (including emails, email attachments, complete email chains, calendar invitations, and calendar attachments) sent or received by the officials named below that contain any of the following key words or phrases.

Officials:

1. Secretary Sonny Perdue
2. Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Stephen Censky
3. Chief of Staff to Secretary Perdue Joby Young
4. Administrator for Food and Nutrition Service Pam Miller
5. Deputy Under Secretary for Food and Nutrition Service Brandon Lipps
6. Anyone serving on the Food Supply Chain Task Force

Key Words:

- i. "Food shortage"
- ii. "food insecurity"
- iii. Starvation
- iv. Hunger
- v. Hungry
- vi. "empty shelf"
- vii. "empty shelves"
- viii. "Milk shortage"
- ix. "shortage of milk"
- x. "meat shortage"
- xi. "shortage of meat"
- xii. Rot

Time (May 14, 2020, 3:50 PM), <https://time.com/5836973/usda-inspector-meat-workers-dead-coronavirus/>.

⁵ See, e.g., Jennifer Smith, *Coronavirus Upheaval Triggers Corporate Search for Supply-Chain Technology*, Wall St. J., (Apr. 29, 2020, 3:45 PM), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-upheaval-triggers-corporate-search-for-supply-chain-technology-11588189553>.

⁶ See, e.g., Alexander Nazaryan & Jana Winter, *Coronavirus May Cause Some Food Shortages, Warns Government Task Force*, Yahoo News (April 3, 2020, 6:33 PM), <https://news.yahoo.com/coronavirus-may-cause-some-food-shortages-says-government-document-223308504.html>; Jim Zarroli, *U.S. Meat Supply Is 'Perilously Close' to a Shortage, CEO Warns*, NPR (Apr. 13, 2020, 10:53 AM), <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/13/833110486/u-s-meat-supply-is-perilously-close-to-a-shortage-ceo-warns>.

Please provide all responsive records from March 15, 2020, through the date the search is conducted.

This request includes all prior messages (whether incoming or outgoing) reflected in the responsive correspondence and any attachments thereto.

Fee Waiver Request

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and your agency's regulations, American Oversight requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records. The subject of this request concerns the operations of the federal government, and the disclosures will likely contribute to a better understanding of relevant government procedures by the general public in a significant way. Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.

American Oversight requests a waiver of fees because disclosure of the requested information is "in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of operations or activities of the government."⁷ The public has a significant interest in potential food shortages.⁸ Records with the potential to shed light on this matter would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the federal government, including whether federal officials have predicted and prepared for potential food shortages.⁹ American Oversight is committed to transparency and makes the responses agencies provide to FOIA requests publicly available, and the public's understanding of the government's activities would be enhanced through American Oversight's analysis and publication of these records.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.¹⁰ As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the information requested is not in American Oversight's financial interest. American Oversight's mission is to promote transparency in government, to educate the public about government activities, and to ensure the accountability of government officials. American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media. American Oversight also makes materials it gathers available on its public website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.¹¹

American Oversight has also demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content through numerous substantive analyses posted to its website.¹² Examples reflecting this commitment to the public disclosure of documents and the creation of editorial content include the posting of records related to an ethics waiver received by a senior Department of Justice attorney and an analysis of what those records

⁷ 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

⁸ See, e.g. Zarroli, *supra* note 6.

⁹ See, e.g. Nazaryan & Winter, *supra* note 6.

¹⁰ See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

¹¹ American Oversight currently has approximately 15,600 page likes on Facebook and 104,000 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited June 26, 2020); American Oversight (@weareoversight), Twitter, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited June 26, 2020).

¹² News, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>.

demonstrated regarding the Department's process for issuing such waivers;¹³ posting records received as part of American Oversight's "Audit the Wall" project to gather and analyze information related to the administration's proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border; and analyses of what those records reveal;¹⁴ posting records regarding potential self-dealing at the Department of Housing & Urban Development and related analysis;¹⁵ posting records and analysis relating to the federal government's efforts to sell nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia;¹⁶ and posting records and analysis regarding the Department of Justice's decision in response to demands from Congress to direct a U.S. Attorney to undertake a wide-ranging review and make recommendations regarding criminal investigations relating to the President's political opponents and allegations of misconduct by the Department of Justice itself and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.¹⁷

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

Application for Expedited Processing

Pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(E)(1) and your agency's regulations, American Oversight requests that your agency expedite the processing of this request.

I certify to be true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief that the information requested is urgently needed in order to inform the public concerning actual or alleged government activity, and American Oversight is primarily engaged in disseminating the information it received from public records requests to the public. Recent reporting demonstrates that there is clearly an urgent need to inform the public regarding the matters that are the subject of American Oversight's FOIA request: how the federal government is responding to the pandemic and, more specifically, whether food shortages have been or are currently predicted.

First, American Oversight has requested records with the potential to shed light on the steps the administration has taken to respond to the novel coronavirus outbreak, which has resulted in a major public health emergency. Because the virus has already killed over a hundred

¹³ *DOJ Records Relating to Solicitor General Noel Francisco's Recusal*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>; *Francisco & the Travel Ban: What We Learned from the DOJ Documents*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/francisco-the-travel-ban-what-we-learned-from-the-doj-documents>.

¹⁴ *See generally Audit the Wall*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>; *see, e.g., Border Wall Investigation Report: No Plans, No Funding, No Timeline, No Wall*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/border-wall-investigation-report-no-plans-no-funding-no-timeline-no-wall>.

¹⁵ *Documents Reveal Ben Carson Jr.'s Attempts to Use His Influence at HUD to Help His Business*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/documents-reveal-ben-carson-jr-s-attempts-to-use-his-influence-at-hud-to-help-his-business>.

¹⁶ *Investigating the Trump Administration's Efforts to Sell Nuclear Technology to Saudi Arabia*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigating-the-trump-administrations-efforts-to-sell-nuclear-technology-to-saudi-arabia>.

¹⁷ *Sessions' Letter Shows DOJ Acted on Trump's Authoritarian Demand to Investigate Clinton*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/sessions-letter>.

thousand people in the United States¹⁸ and is on the rise in over 20 states,¹⁹ there is plainly an urgent need to inform the public about how the federal government is responding to the pandemic. The widespread and exceptional media interest on coronavirus demonstrates that the public urgently needs information about the federal government's efforts and policies concerning the subject matter of this request.²⁰

Moreover, I certify to be true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief that there is an urgent need to inform the public about potential food shortages. The public is deeply concerned about potential food shortages²¹ and increased grocery prices,²² as evidenced by early stockpiling of food²³ and the media's continuous coverage of COVID-19 outbreaks in food processing plants.²⁴ These concerns are rooted in uncertain predictions about the pandemic²⁵ and its effects on food supply chain²⁶—the focus of this request. As Americans struggle to make

¹⁸ *Coronavirus in the U.S: Latest Map and Case Count*, N.Y. Times (June 25, 2020, 8:24 AM), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html>.

¹⁹ See Derek Hawkins, *As Coronavirus Infections Surge Nationwide, 21 States See Increase in Average Daily New Cases*, Wash. Post (June 13, 2020, 10:06 PM), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/06/13/coronavirus-live-updates-us/>.

²⁰ Hannah Knowles, et al., *Live updates: Arizona Reports Record-high New Cases, Jump in Hospitalizations as Trump Visits*, Wash. Post (June 23, 2020, 12:42 PM EST), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/06/23/coronavirus-live-updates-us/>; Priscilla Alvarez, et al., *Live Updates: Trump Administration Races to Restock Supplies Before Possible Second Wave of Covid-19*, CNN (June 23, 2020, 10:37 AM), <https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-06-23-20-intl/index.html>.

²¹ See, e.g. Iain Marlow & Agnieszka de Sousa, *What Will it Take to Avoid a Global Food Shortage*, Bloomberg (June 9, 2020, 5:00 PM), <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2020-solving-the-global-food-problem/>; *U.S. Food Makers Stock up on Ingredients in Case of Another Coronavirus Surge*, Bloomberg (June 9, 2020, 4:19 PM), <https://www.latimes.com/food/story/2020-06-09/coronavirus-pandemic-food-supply>.

²² See, e.g. Jordan Strickland, *USDA Finds Grocery Prices Rising At Highest Rate Since 2012*, Forbes (May 27, 2020, 7:08 AM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jordanstrickler/2020/05/27/usda-finds-grocery-prices-rising-at-highest-rate-since-2012/#191f26ae44c6>.

²³ See, e.g. Melissa Repko, *Shoppers Begin to Shift From Stockpiling to Penny Pinching at the Grocery Store*, CNBC (May 13, 2020, 1:12 PM), <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/13/shoppers-shift-from-stockpiling-to-penny-pinching-at-the-grocery-store.html>.

²⁴ Mike Dorning, *More Food Shortages Loom With Outbreaks at 60 U.S Plants*, Bloomberg (June 9, 2020, 6:00 AM), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-09/outbreaks-at-60-u-s-food-plants-raise-specter-of-more-shortages>; Alex Gangitano, *Food Supply Worries Grow After Outbreak Closes Smithfield Meat Plant*, The Hill (Apr. 14, 2020, 6:00 AM) <https://thehill.com/business-a-lobbying/business-a-lobbying/492625-food-supply-worries-grow-after-outbreak-closes>; Mike Dorning, *Thirty Workers, Four USDA Inspectors Dead Amid Meat Plant Coronavirus Outbreaks*, Time (May 14, 2020, 3:50 PM), <https://time.com/5836973/usda-inspector-meat-workers-dead-coronavirus/>.

²⁵ See, e.g. *Top Health Experts Paint Bleak Picture of Pandemic*, N.Y. Times, May 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/12/us/coronavirus-live-news-updates.html>; Audrey McNamara, *Fauci Says "We're Still in a First Wave" of Coronavirus Pandemic*, CBS News (June 17, 2020, 2:45 PM), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-first-wave-fauci/>.

²⁶ See, e.g. Melissa Repko & Amelia Lucas, *The Meat Supply Chain is Broken. Here's Why Shortages are Likely to Last During the Coronavirus Pandemic*, CNBC, (May 7, 2020, 1:55 PM),

financial and health decisions for their families during an unprecedented global pandemic and recession, they urgently need to know whether food shortages are predicted.

I further certify that American Oversight is primarily engaged in disseminating information to the public. American Oversight's mission is to promote transparency in government, to educate the public about government activities, and to ensure the accountability of government officials. Similar to other organizations that have been found to satisfy the criteria necessary to qualify for expedition,²⁷ American Oversight "gathers information of potential interest to a segment of the public, uses its editorial skills to turn the raw material into a distinct work, and distributes that work to an audience."²⁸ American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, and other media. American Oversight also makes materials it gathers available on its public website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.²⁹ As discussed previously, American Oversight has demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content.³⁰

Accordingly, American Oversight's request satisfies the criteria for expedition.

Guidance Regarding the Search & Processing of Requested Records

In connection with its request for records, American Oversight provides the following guidance regarding the scope of the records sought and the search and processing of records:

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/07/heres-why-meat-shortages-are-likely-to-last-during-the-pandemic.html>.

²⁷ See *ACLU v. U.S. Dep't of Justice*, 321 F. Supp. 2d 24, 30–31 (D.D.C. 2004); *EPIC v. Dep't of Defense*, 241 F. Supp. 2d 5, 15 (D.D.C. 2003).

²⁸ *ACLU*, 321 F. Supp. 2d at 29 n.5 (quoting *EPIC*, 241 F. Supp. 2d at 11).

²⁹ American Oversight currently has approximately 15,500 page likes on Facebook and 104,000 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, Facebook,

<https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited June 23, 2020); American Oversight (@weareoversight), Twitter, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited June 23, 2020).

³⁰ See generally *News*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>; see, e.g., *The Trump Administration's Response to Coronavirus*, American Oversight,

<https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/the-trump-administrations-response-to-coronavirus>; *Wisconsin Documents Offer Window Into Early Uncertainty Over COVID-19*,

American Oversight, June 17, 2020, <https://www.americanoversight.org/wisconsin-documents-offer-window-into-early-uncertainty-over-covid-19>; *In the Documents: Florida Health Department Efforts to Suppress Release of Coronavirus Records*, American Oversight,

June 11, 2020, <https://www.americanoversight.org/in-the-documents-florida-health-department-efforts-to-suppress-release-of-coronavirus-records>; *Audit the Wall*, American Oversight,

<https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>; *State Department Records of Ukraine-Related Communications*, American Oversight, Mar. 23, 2020,

<https://www.americanoversight.org/document/state-department-records-of-ukraine-related-communications>; *Documents Reveal Ben Carson Jr.'s Attempts to Use His Influence at HUD to Help His Business*, American Oversight, Mar. 4, 2019,

<https://www.americanoversight.org/documents-reveal-ben-carson-jr-s-attempts-to-use-his-influence-at-hud-to-help-his-business>; *Francisco & the Travel Ban: What We Learned from the DOJ Documents*, American Oversight, June 23, 2017,

<https://www.americanoversight.org/francisco-the-travel-ban-what-we-learned-from-the-doj-documents>.

- Please search all locations and systems likely to have responsive records, regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics.
- Our request for records includes any attachments to those records or other materials enclosed with those records when they were previously transmitted. To the extent that an email is responsive to our request, our request includes all prior messages sent or received in that email chain, as well as any attachments to the email.
- Please search all relevant records or systems containing records regarding agency business. Do not exclude records regarding agency business contained in files, email accounts, or devices in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts or text messages. Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files are subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.³¹ It is not adequate to rely on policies and procedures that require officials to move such information to official systems within a certain period of time; American Oversight has a right to records contained in those files even if material has not yet been moved to official systems or if officials have, by intent or through negligence, failed to meet their obligations.³²
- Please use all tools available to your agency to conduct a complete and efficient search for potentially responsive records. Agencies are subject to government-wide requirements to manage agency information electronically,³³ and many agencies have adopted the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies. These systems provide options for searching emails and other electronic records in a manner that is reasonably likely to be more complete than just searching individual custodian files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but your agency’s archiving tools may capture that email under Capstone. At the same time, custodian searches are still necessary; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.
- In the event some portions of the requested records are properly exempt from disclosure, please disclose any reasonably segregable non-exempt portions of the requested records. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically why it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.
- Please take appropriate steps to ensure that records responsive to this request are not deleted by the agency before the completion of processing for this request. If records potentially responsive to this request are likely to be located on systems where they are subject to potential deletion, including on a scheduled basis, please take steps to

³¹ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, 827 F.3d 145, 149–50 (D.C. Cir. 2016); cf. *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Kerry*, 844 F.3d 952, 955–56 (D.C. Cir. 2016).

³² See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016).

³³ Presidential Memorandum—Managing Government Records, 76 Fed. Reg. 75,423 (Nov. 28, 2011), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/28/presidential-memorandum-managing-government-records>; Office of Mgmt. & Budget, Exec. Office of the President, Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments & Independent Agencies, “Managing Government Records Directive,” M-12-18 (Aug. 24, 2012), <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/m-12-18.pdf>.

prevent that deletion, including, as appropriate, by instituting a litigation hold on those records.

Conclusion

If you have any questions regarding how to construe this request for records or believe that further discussions regarding search and processing would facilitate a more efficient production of records of interest to American Oversight, please do not hesitate to contact American Oversight to discuss this request. American Oversight welcomes an opportunity to discuss its request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or duplication costs. By working together at the outset, American Oversight and your agency can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in an electronic format by email. Alternatively, please provide responsive material in native format or in PDF format on a USB drive. Please send any responsive material being sent by mail to American Oversight, 1030 15th Street NW, Suite B255, Washington, DC 20005. If it will accelerate release of responsive records to American Oversight, please also provide responsive material on a rolling basis.

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with your agency on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, please contact Megan Field at foia@americanoversight.org or 202.897.2465. Also, if American Oversight's request for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Austin R. Evers", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the left.

Austin R. Evers
Executive Director
American Oversight