United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 16, 2026

The Honorable T. March Bell
Inspector General
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
330 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Inspector General Bell,

We write to request that you open an investigation into how personnel and policy changes at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) contributed to this summer's Cyclosporiasis (Cyclospora) outbreak, which was an unusually large, multistate outbreak that resulted in more than twelve thousand confirmed cases and two deaths. It is clear that the FDA and CDC failed to adequately prevent and respond to this outbreak, and we believe that is, in no small part, due to this Administration's illegal staffing cuts over the last 18 months. Additionally, we are concerned that political interference resulted in delayed recalls and inspections of facilities linked to this outbreak.

According to data from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the Trump administration has pushed out over 4,600 FDA staff since January 2025.[1] Through a series of mass reductions in force (RIFs), the Trump administration has fired key staff working in policy, human resources, IT, procurement, and communications,[2] as well as staff who worked to write guidance documents, regulations, and issue press releases about the FDA's activities such as recalls.[3] These policy and communications staff are not dispensable; they play a key role in ensuring the American people have information about disease outbreaks that could jeopardize their health. Having staff working to disseminate this information is especially important during recalls, like during the cyclospora outbreak, in order to quickly share information to keep people safe.[4] The absence of clear, consistent communication from the FDA was evident during this outbreak, led to unnecessary confusion, delayed responses, and likely led to more people getting sick. Furthermore, Secretary Kennedy's comments that the cyclospora outbreak was "under control" only led to more confusion for the public as the FDA continued to expand the outbreak to more and more states.[5]

Last year, the Trump administration pushed out support staff who worked directly with inspectors to ensure they can seamlessly visit FDA-regulated facilities.[6] This has left inspectors responsible for coordinating their own travel, scheduling their inspections, communicating with FDA-regulated facilities, and filling out paperwork for which they used to have additional

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[1] https://data.opm.gov/explore-data/analytics/workforce-changes
[2] https://www.cbsnews.com/news/job-cuts-federal-health-agencies-rfk-jr/
[3] https://www.skadden.com/insights/publications/2025/04/trump-administrations-first-100-days/mass-layoffs-at-fda?_sp=1a5528fe-877a-4bb6-9623-df4171b4a783
[4] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC1854984/
[5] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/jul/21/rfk-jr-cyclospora-outbreak
[6] https://www.forbes.com/sites/louisbiscotti/2025/05/06/fda-job-cuts-spark-food-safety-debate/

support—all of which simply meant that they were able to conduct fewer inspections and keep our food supply safe. The FDA reports that outside of the years of COVID-19, 2025's inspection count was the lowest since 2011, and based on available data, inspections for 2026 will be at a similarly low rate.[7] The FDA has struggled to retain inspectors for many years, and instead of working to hire and retain more and ensure they have the support they need to effectively do their jobs, the Trump administration destroyed their support base. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) made three recommendations about ways to improve retention of inspectors to better protect the U.S. food supply in January of 2025, and as of June 2026, the FDA had concurred with the recommendations but has failed to respond to several of the key recommendations, including defining the appropriate size and workload for its foreign investigators to meet the FDA's foreign inspection needs to protect the American food supply and developing performance management processes to improve inspection goals.[8]

The FDA failed to quickly inspect the suspected source of the outbreak. It took the FDA over a month to access the Taylor Farms facility and farms that have now been linked to this Cyclospora outbreak.[9] It is also important to note that the facility's most recent inspection took place in 2019, meaning that the FDA has not had eyes on the conditions of this facility for at least seven years. It is also troubling that Taylor Farms appears to have interfered in the FDA and CDC's ongoing investigation of this cyclospora outbreak, including by potentially delaying access to their facility directly linked to this outbreak in Mexico. Of similar concern is the fact that Taylor Farms reportedly met with the White House and made contributions to Republican Political Action Committees in order to change the course of the investigation.[10] We request an investigation into whether political interference from Taylor Farms put the American people at further risk by delaying the time it took to remove their products from the market, thus increasing the number of cyclospora cases this summer.

It is clear it was not just the FDA that failed to quickly and effectively respond under this administration. Similar personnel, funding, and policy decisions at CDC call into question how the agency responded to this outbreak—and its ability to effectively address others. The Trump administration has pushed out approximately 3,000 CDC staff members since January 2025, greatly diminishing the agency's ability to respond to public health emergencies.[11] Due to attrition and probationary staff firings, the CDC lab that responds to outbreaks of cyclospora was downsized from eleven people to just three last year.[12] CDC staff are already stretched thin responding to other outbreaks, including a rapidly worsening Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Further impacting CDC's ability to respond to the cyclospora outbreak is the loss of $40 million in funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) after the Trump administration illegally dismantled it in 2025. While CDC hopes to recover

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[7] https://datadashboard.fda.gov/oii/cd/inspections.htm

[8] https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-25-107571

[9] https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2026/08/14/fda-mexico-month-after-linking-taylor-farms-cyclospora-outbreak/

[10] https://www.wired.com/story/diarrhea-outbreak-taylor-farms-maga-donations-lobbying/

[11] https://www.npr.org/2026/03/13/nx-s1-5742530/cdc-atlanta-firings-funding-cuts-shooting-public-health

[12] https://www.wired.com/story/cdc-cyclospora-lab-doge-downsized-it-last-year/

some of that funding, it will only be a fraction of what it used to receive from USAID.[13] The reduction in funding has resulted in the loss of staff who would often be called upon to assist in an emergency response situation. Fewer staff and experts make it impossible to respond quickly to an outbreak, where timely response is vital.

The Trump administration's decision to remove mandatory reporting of cyclospora by the Foodborne Diseases Active Surveillance Network, (FoodNet) is also confounding—and has put our food supply at risk.[14] While FoodNet is not used to track outbreaks in real time, the removal of cyclospora mandatory reporting risks negatively affected the ability for the program to understand this outbreak and provide an analysis on trends of cyclospora outbreaks over time, which in turn could help reduce the risk of future wide-spread outbreaks.

Lastly, the Office of Pandemic Preparedness and Response (OPPR) was created by Congress to coordinate the federal government's response to public health crises like this outbreak. This administration has utterly failed to ensure it is fully staffed and operational to protect Americans from disease outbreaks and ensure coordination across government. For over a year, OPPR did not so much as have a director or even any staff. It has been widely reported that the administration appointed Dr. Sara Brenner, a former FDA official, to lead OPPR in July of this year. But it's not clear how long she will remain in the position, or if a single additional person is serving on staff.[15]

For all these reasons, we request that you open an investigation that evaluates the following questions:

1. Have RIFs of support staff for inspectors affected inspectors' ability to meet demand for inspections?
2. Has the loss of support staff taken inspectors away from the critical parts of their jobs?
3. Will the FDA meet inspection targets for the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) in 2026 and if not, what is needed to meet those targets in future years?
4. Why hasn't the FDA implemented all of the GAO's recommendations for retaining inspectors?
5. Are there additional challenges that are affecting the inspectorate at the FDA that are not outlined in the GAO report?
6. Does HHS OIG have additional recommendations to improve recruitment and retention for inspectors?
7. How will the July 2028 implementation of the FDA's Food Traceability Rule impact any corrective actions that should be taken in the wake of future foodborne illness outbreaks?
8. Should the FDA implement inspection targets for international food facilities like those of domestic facilities to have better oversight of all the food entering the U.S. market?
9. Why did it take over a month for the FDA to access the Taylor Farms facility in Mexico that has now been linked to this outbreak?

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[13] https://www.cnbc.com/2026/07/23/cyclospora-outbreak-tests-rfk-jr-response-funding-cuts.html?msockid=3e13f4447dd9605c3ae7e1d77c526194

[14] https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/cdc-quietly-scaled-back-surveillance-program-foodborne-illnesses-rcna227089

[15] https://www.washingtonsun.com/health-science/white-house-pandemic-preparedness?redirected=notus_org

10. In areas where the U.S. government may have security concerns internationally, what contingencies has the FDA put into place to ensure that the FDA's inspectors are able to access facilities to ensure the safety of the FDA-regulated products?
    - If there are not contingencies in place, should the U.S. government consider preventing imports from areas with international security concerns to protect the FDA's inspectors and the American public until contingencies are created?
11. Prior to accessing the Taylor Farms facility in Mexico in July, why hadn't the facility been inspection since 2019?
12. Did meetings or communications with the White House or donations to Trump-associated Political Action Committees delay the FDA's response to this outbreak and identifying Taylor Farms as the culprit?

We appreciate your work on this important inquiry.

Sincerely,

Patty Murray
Vice Chair
Senate Committee on
Appropriations

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator
Ranking Member,
Subcommittee on
Agriculture, Rural
Development, Food and Drug
Administration, and Related
Agencies
Committee on Appropriations

Tammy Baldwin
Ranking Member
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