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Trump's Proposed Ag Secretary Falls Short on Agriculture's Big Challenges

Minneapolis/Washington – One day before his inauguration, President-elect Donald Trump finally announced his nominee to run the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The selection, former Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue, has no substantial record in addressing several critical challenges for farmers and rural communities: three straight years of plunging farm incomes and rising farm debt; building resilience on the farm and in rural communities to climate change; and the impact on farmers and ranchers of increasing corporate control of agricultural prices and costs.

“It’s deeply troubling and telling that President-elect Trump’s selection to lead the agency most important to rural America was the last of his cabinet,” said IATP’s Ben Lilliston. “Farmers and rural communities are dealing with huge problems, including collapsing agricultural prices and rising costs associated with climate change. Real leadership is badly needed at USDA on these issues, yet this selection’s main selling point seems to be that he’s a friend of agribusiness.”

The USDA is one of government’s largest agencies with over 90,000 staff and a budget of \$150 billion, and programs on agriculture, food and nutrition, energy, forestry and rural development. Trump’s decision to delay Perdue’s appointment means there will be little time to ensure a smooth transition with the previous administration to keep important programs running effectively and to assess whether new initiatives and resources are needed.

Farm incomes have dropped for three straight years as prices for many farm commodities have dipped below the cost of production. Farm to income debt ratios are the highest since 1985. Yesterday, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reported that 2016 was the hottest year ever recorded, the third straight year in which the record was broken. Extreme weather linked to climate change is already affecting U.S. farmers. In recent years, California and the Midwest have experienced drought and the southern and southeast coasts have had hurricanes. Perdue’s dismissive comments on climate change are deeply troubling at a time when the USDA should be leading efforts to build climate resilience on farms and in rural communities.

“Governor Perdue, if confirmed as Secretary, will try to manage an agricultural system that is broken for most farmers and ranchers,” said IATP’s Steve Suppan. “Coming trade disputes and retaliatory tariffs, promised by the Trump Administration, likely will further reduce farm income and profitability. We hope that the Governor will resist the many lobbying pressures to be a Business-As-Usual Secretary.”

Perdue will also face a series of proposed agribusiness mergers that have major implications for farmers. The three major pending seed and pesticide company mergers (Monsanto-Bayer, Syngenta-ChemChina, and Dow-DuPont) continue a trend of growing corporate power in the agriculture sector. Pre-empting the Justice Department’s review, President-elect Trump met with Monsanto and Bayer officials last week as part of an early negotiation of the merger, without hearing farmers’ concerns about how the mergers will impact seed choices.

Perdue’s agriculture experience comes from his time as the Governor of Georgia, the nation’s top chicken producer. Following the appointment announcement, Perdue received the quick endorsement from the chicken industry and beef cattle industry. Last month, the Obama Administration issued long-awaited rules designed to protect poultry growers from unfair contracts set by the big poultry companies. Perdue’s position on implementing and enforcing those rules will be an early test of whether he will stand up for farmers and ranchers.



Perdue's nomination continues a troubling trend of Trump cabinet appointees with deep ties to corporate and financial firms. IATP will continue to analyze the proposed Trump cabinet throughout the confirmation process.

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Based in Minneapolis with offices in Washington, D.C. and Berlin, Germany, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy connects the dots of global justice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems.