

DOGE's Cuts at the USDA Could Cause US Grocery Prices to Rise and Invasive Species to Spread

2025: Kate Knibbs is a senior writer at WIRED



Before he was abruptly fired last month, Derek Copeland worked as a trainer at the US Department of Agriculture's National Dog Detection Training Center, preparing beagles and Labrador retrievers to sniff out plants and animals [that are invasive](#) or vectors for zoonotic diseases, like [swine fever](#). Copeland estimates the NDDTC lost about a fifth of its trainers and a number of other support staff when 6,000 employees were [let go at the USDA](#) in February as part of a government-wide purge orchestrated by the Trump administration and [Elon Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency \(DOGE\)](#).

Before he received his termination notice, he says, Copeland had just spent several months training the only dog stationed in Florida capable of detecting the Giant African land snail, an invasive mollusk that poses a significant threat to Florida agriculture. "We have dogs for spotted and lantern flies, Asian longhorn beetles," he says, referring to two other non-native species. "I don't think the American people realize how much crap that people bring into the United States."

Dog trainers are just one example of the kind of highly specialized USDA staff that have been removed from their stations in recent weeks. [Teams devoted to inspecting plant and food imports have been hit](#)

especially hard by the recent cuts, including the Plant Protection and Quarantine program, which has lost hundreds of staffers alone.

“It’s causing problems left and right,” says one current USDA worker, who like other federal employees in this story asked to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation. “It’s basically a skeleton crew working now,” says another current USDA staffer, who noted that both they and most of their colleagues held advanced degrees and had many years of training to protect US food and agriculture supply chains from invasive pests. “It’s not something that is easily replaced by artificial intelligence.”

“These aren’t your average people,” says Mike Lahar, the regulatory affairs manager at US customs broker behemoth Deringer. “These were highly trained individuals—inspectors, entomologists, taxonomists.”

Lahar and other supply chain experts warn that the losses could cause food to go rotten while waiting in ports and could lead to even higher grocery prices, in addition to increasing the chances of potentially devastating invasive species getting into the country. These dangers are especially acute at a moment when US grocery supply chains are already reeling from other business disruptions such as bird flu and President Trump’s new tariffs.

“If we’re inspecting less food, the first basic thing that happens is some amount of that food we don’t inspect is likely to go bad. We’re going to end up losing resources,” says supply chain industry veteran and software CEO Joe Hudicka.

Got a Tip?

Are you a current or former government employee who wants to talk about what’s happening? We’d like to hear from you. Using a nonwork phone or computer, contact the reporter securely on Signal at Kateknibbs.09.

The USDA cuts are being felt especially in coastal states home to major shipping ports. USDA sources who spoke to WIRED estimate that the Port of Los Angeles, one of the busiest in the US, lost around 35 percent of its total Plant Protection and Quarantine staff and 60 percent of its “smuggling and interdiction” employees, who are tasked with stopping illegal pests and goods from entering the country. The Port of Miami, which handles high volumes of US plant imports, lost about 35 percent of its plant inspectors.