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# Trump's ag funding freeze stymies Michigan farmers, conservation groups

**Carol Thompson and Melissa Nann Burke** The Detroit News

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Funding cuts, grant freezes and staff layoffs at the U.S. Department of Agriculture have led to cancellations or delays of Michigan food, farming and conservation projects, officials and project managers said, opening up another front in the Trump administration's efforts to downsize the federal government.

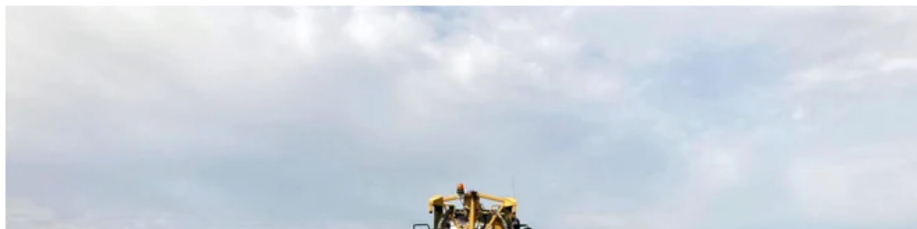
Some Michigan farmers haven't received promised reimbursements for the cost of planting soil-saving cover crops. A \$25 million contract to protect farmland in southern Michigan faces an uncertain future.

And a recently hired USDA engineer in west Michigan was laid off – she's now unable to help design ditches, livestock pens and watershed projects for landowners. Tree-planting projects are on hold in cities across Michigan, and funding for a statewide agricultural pest management program is delayed. Food bank leaders are afraid they'll lose funding they are planning on.

"As someone who cares a lot about conservation but also is working on behalf of landowners, it's been a little frustrating to see this award get caught in the crossfire that's going on," said Susan LaCroix, land protection director at the Legacy Land Conservancy in Ann Arbor, which has a \$25 million contract with USDA hanging in the balance as President Donald Trump's administration scrutinizes federal funding programs.

"We definitely want to continue to move forward."

LaCroix is among the leaders of conservation and farm organizations who said funding they had been awarded by the USDA was frozen or canceled since Trump took office last month. Others said layoffs at the USDA hamper their ability to help farmers.



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Farmer Rick Clifton grows cereal rye and rapeseed to prevent erosion and make the ground healthier for his corn, soybean and wheat cash crops. Cover crops store carbon in the soil, keeping the greenhouse gas out of the atmosphere. Some Michigan farmers haven't received promised reimbursements for the cost of planting soil-saving cover crops since President Donald Trump's administration began imposing spending cuts at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. *John Flesher, AP*

Trump, his appointees and billionaire adviser Elon Musk have launched wide-ranging cuts to the federal budget, including [firings of federal employees](#), the [near-elimination of the U.S. Agency for International Development](#) and [halted or canceled funding for climate](#) and diversity programs.

"USDA is reviewing projects to ensure they are aligned with the president's directives, and that they are focused on supporting farmers and ranchers and rural communities, not far-left climate projects or DEIA initiatives," the Department of Agriculture said in a statement.

Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Director Tim Boring addressed Congress on Wednesday to emphasize the importance of federal support programs for specialty crops such as cherries and Christmas trees grown in Michigan.

Before his testimony, he said some reimbursement payments promised to Michigan farmers are on "pause," causing "real concern there about the long-term certainty of that funding."

"We're seeing some pauses on grants that our department has, as well. So we're watching. We're talking closely with federal partners about what the status of those grants might be," Boring told The Detroit News.

The funding freeze comes amid thousands of staffing cuts at local and regional USDA offices around the country, including Farm Service Agency and U.S. Forestry Service staffers, lawmakers and officials said.

**More:** [This Michigan woman hoped Trump's victory would change her life, but not like this](#)

## Uncertainty concerns state ag director

The scope of the hold on USDA funding isn't clear. An internal agency email obtained by the Washington Post showed that the USDA in late January enacted a funding freeze that affected all grants funded under two major bills enacted under President Joe Biden: The Inflation Reduction Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

The freeze also applied to any other program that could violate Trump's executive orders that prohibit federal support for diversity, equity and inclusion and climate programs, according to the Post.

In a statement, a USDA spokesperson told The Detroit News this week there's no blanket freeze on agency funding amid the ongoing review of grant-funded projects.

The spokesperson noted that Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins last week greenlighted a \$20 million tranche of contracts that had been paused due to the review of funding under the Inflation Reduction Act. The agency said Rollins intends to "honor contracts that were already made directly to farmers."

"We will honor our commitments to American farmers and ranchers, and we will ensure they have the support they need to be the most competitive in the world," Rollins said in a statement.



Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins speaks at a Trump campaign rally in Madison Square Garden on Oct. 27, 2024, in New York. *Evan Vucci, AP*

Still, despite court orders that federal dollars be freed and despite the White House rescinding its blanket spending freeze after public pushback, funding to farmers and other groups has been held up.

Gerald Miller, president of the Michigan Association of Conservation Districts and a member of the Kent Conservation District's board, said reimbursement payments are stalled for farmers who participated in a climate-smart farming project in southeast Michigan. Farmers and subcontractors spent money on things like fences and wind barriers and haven't been paid back since Trump took over the Oval Office on Jan. 20.

"If a farmer bought the seed to do cover crops this spring, she may be holding an empty bag, if you understand what I'm saying," Miller said.

Boring noted a lot of farmers with cost reimbursement grants under USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service have been put on pause, without any clarity on when or if the funding might resume.

"There's real concern there about the long-term certainty of that funding," Boring said.

State Rep. Jerry Neyer, a Shepard Republican who leads the Michigan House Agriculture Committee, said he is "monitoring the situation" and waiting for concrete information from stakeholders about what effects, if any, Michigan farmers might face.

"I am concerned how it could affect us, or if they're going to make the funding sources available through a different route than it has traditionally come through," Neyer told The News.

USDA also hasn't released \$10 billion in economic relief payments to farmers affected by natural disasters that Congress passed in December. Rollins [told an ag publication Thursday](#) the funds would be out by March 21.

## Farmland preservation stalled

Legacy Land Conservancy, which preserves farmland from real estate development, delayed its plan to conserve 4,000 acres in Washtenaw, Jackson, Lenawee, Livingston and Wayne counties as a result of the USDA funding freeze, LaCroix said. USDA staff told the conservancy they had been instructed not to sign any more contracts that were under negotiation, including Legacy's.

The conservancy, along with other area nonprofits and local governments, was awarded \$24.6 million in Regional Conservation Partnership Program funding in 2024 to conserve farmland to ensure it isn't developed into suburbs or strip malls. The funding was also to help landowners prevent soil erosion and to protect forests and natural areas near farms. The groups would match the federal funding with approximately \$22 million in local spending, LaCroix said.

Landowners who plan to work with the conservancy are "kind of in the lurch as we wait to hear about this contract," LaCroix said. "Land ownership isn't a short-term thing. A lot of them, at least that we've worked with, are generally used to waiting for these federal programs ... There's definitely some disappointments among them, but they're in it for the long haul."

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program was created by former U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, a Lansing Democrat who chaired the Senate Agriculture panel through last year. She called Rollins' release of the \$20 million tranche of payments to farmers "nothing," noting that altogether the conservation money in the Inflation Reduction Act totals \$14 billion – all of which goes "directly" to farmers, she said.

"The question is – particularly because of the nature of this – will our Republican colleagues stop them and stand up for our farmers?" Stabenow said. "And that's going to take farmers and rural communities speaking out and pushing back and telling the story of what this really is."

In addition to farmers, reimbursements to nonprofit groups and small businesses that provide technical assistance to farmers have also been frozen, lawmakers said, despite signed contracts with USDA to provide the services.

"Now they're being told they won't be paid," Stabenow said. "Our farmers in Michigan, most of them have pretty narrow margins. It's illegal, and it's just absolutely wrong that they are renegeing on these contracts."

## UP farmer outreach initiative stopped

Funding for the Urban and Community Forestry program through the USDA's Forest Service also has been put on hold, Michigan Department of Natural Resources spokesperson Ed Golder confirmed. It was funded under the Inflation Reduction Act.

That means the Chippewa Luce Mackinac Conservation District can't move ahead on its plan to plant trees in western Mackinac County, where the plants could absorb storm water in a flood-prone township campground or shade public gathering spaces, executive director Mike McCarthy said.

A different USDA funding cut hit the eastern Upper Peninsula conservation district harder. The organization had last year been awarded enough money to fund an AmeriCorps volunteer position through the Working Lands Climate Corps. Michigan's agriculture department also was an awardee of that program.

The volunteer whom Chippewa Luce Mackinac Conservation District hired was charged with reaching out to tribal members and Amish farmers to understand what barriers they might face in working with USDA programs and to address the communities' farming or environmental concerns.

But the funding for that program was canceled, McCarthy said, and the conservation district will eliminate the AmeriCorps post by mid-March.

"We were told in an email that the funding has been canceled, and that it is not being renewed, and there's no chance of it coming back using USDA funding," he said. "They had put out a second year of funding for it that was in the application stage, and the application was also canceled. Unfortunately, the initiative is not likely to return under the current federal administration."

Layoffs of USDA workers took another toll on conservation work, McCarthy said. Like other conservation districts, the Chippewa Luce Mackinac Conservation District is co-located with a USDA service center. One of the two USDA employees in Sault Ste. Marie lost her job because she was a probationary employee, McCarthy said.

The same happened in Kent County, Miller said. He said 14 of the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service employees in Michigan recently lost their jobs because of their probationary status, including an engineer in Grand Rapids who had moved from working at the Kent Conservation District to the USDA on Nov. 16.

"It affects our district," he said. "She was an area engineer, and the area serves I think 18 counties here in west and southwest Michigan."

## Uncertainty weighs on food banks

Also caught up in the freeze is grant funding for the Michigan State University Extension's Integrated Pest Management centers, which coordinate the sharing of resources to boost adoption of pest management practices across the state.

Ron Bates, director of MSU Extension agriculture and agribusiness programs, said through a spokeswoman that the funding delay "will indirectly impact farmers due to not having the resources to improve their pest management programs to this year's conditions."

The Food Bank Council of Michigan also expressed concern about the lack of clarity and communication from USDA on certain funding sources for the state's food banks and whether funds previously allocated will remain available to the food banks for use as planned.

"Ultimately, any changes that lessen the impact of the federal food and nutrition programs will negatively impact our food banks, the farmers we purchase from, and the communities and people our network serves," said Anna Almanza, director of Public Policy & Government Relations for the council.

The scope with which USDA touches Americans from small towns to big cities shows why the funding issues have gotten so much attention, said Chuck Lippstreu, president of the Michigan Agri-Business Association.

"This is an issue we continue to track, given that we're in the first two months of the Trump administration, and that news is moving quickly," Lippstreu said.

"Certainly, the funding freeze has created some uncertainty across farm country."

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