



Do Changes in Food and Agriculture Policy Align with Changes in Public Priorities?

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From the Reconciliation Farm Bill to drastic changes in spending and priorities at USDA in the second Trump Administration, American food and agricultural policy is experiencing an unusual amount of turbulence and upheaval. Added to this are demands from the Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) movement about different aspects of the food system (*farmdoc daily*, [September 8](#); [September 17](#)). In this post, we explore changes in public perceptions on USDA spending priorities using results from the Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey (GFAPS) from both May 2022 and August 2025, evaluating how recent policy changes compare to public preferences.

Methods

In this post, we use GFAPS results from May 2022 (wave 1) and August 2025 (wave 14). In each wave, GFAPS surveys approximately 1,000 U.S. consumers. Qualtrics panels recruits participants using quota sampling in an effort to be representative of the U.S. population in terms of gender, age, income, and geographic region.

For this post, we focus on questions that were designed to gauge participants' priorities and relative support for USDA programs. First, we asked participants to consider how they would hypothetically divvy up money meant for the USDA. Specifically, participants were asked: “Suppose the USDA gave you \$100 to divide among its six budget categories. How much money would you give to each category?” Participants were instructed that their answers should add to \$100; if they did not, they were asked to correct their responses. Additionally, we advised participants that if they would not give money to a certain category, they should type a response of \$0. Participants were provided the following six categories based on previous research on this matter (Ellison and Lusk, [2011](#)):

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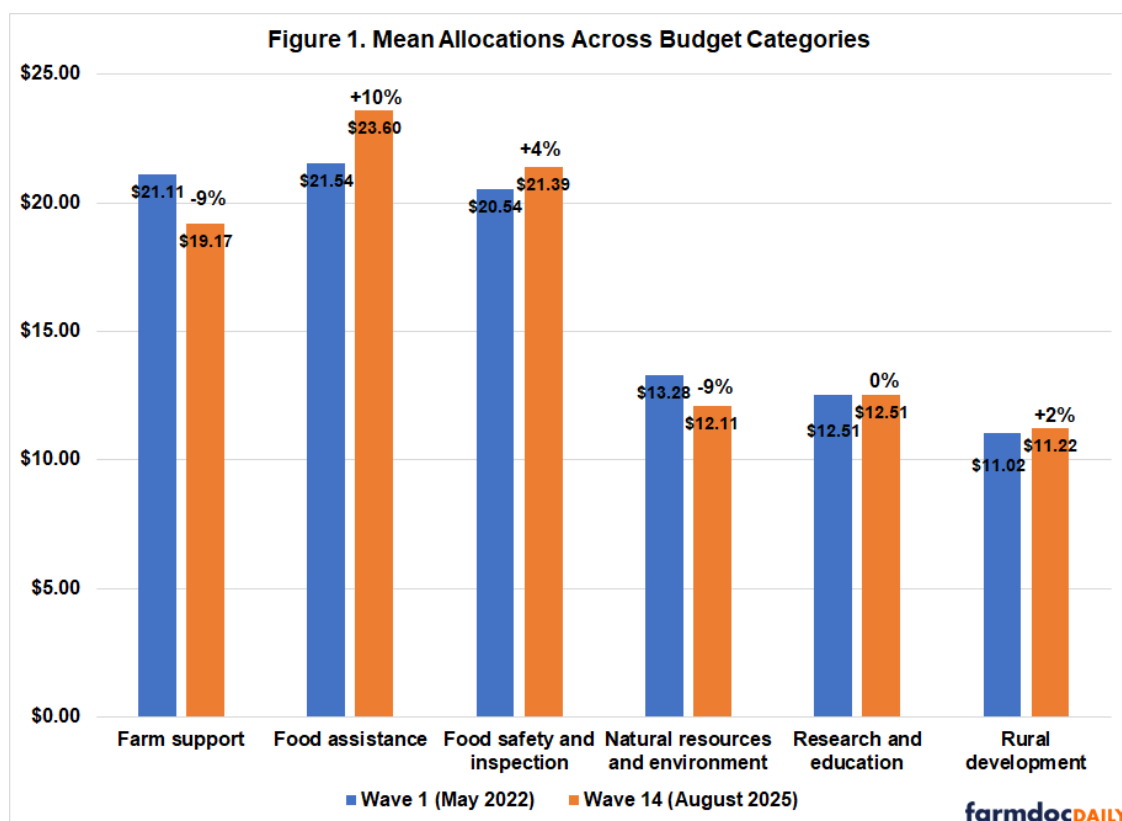
- Farm Support – includes farm and commodity programs (direct payments, price supports), crop insurance fund, etc.
- Food Assistance – includes the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infants and Children (WIC), National School Lunch Program (NSLP), etc.
- Food Safety and Inspection – includes Food Safety and Inspection Service, Animal, Plant, and Grain Inspection, etc.
- Natural Resources and Environment – includes Natural Resource Conservation Service, National Forest System, etc.
- Research and Education – includes Agricultural Research Service, cooperative state research, education, and extension, etc.
- Rural Development – includes loans and grants for rural utilities, housing, and businesses.

We also asked participants to identify which of the six USDA spending categories they view as *most* important. For both questions, we compare responses across survey waves, as well as by political party affiliation. Note that the order of spending categories was randomized to prevent ordering effects for both questions and survey waves.

Results

Figure 1 shows respondents' mean allocations of the hypothetical \$100 for USDA spending categories in both May 2022 and August 2025 as well as the percent change in the means over the three-year period. Notably, the top three categories of budget expenditures remain the same across both waves – food assistance, farm support, and food safety and inspection. The mean allocations are also more evenly spread among the six categories than *actual* policy, which could indicate a lack of alignment or insufficient knowledge and understanding of USDA spending. Ellison and Lusk (2011) found that even when consumers were given information on the actual USDA budget allocations for each category, consumers still preferred a more equitable distribution of funds.

Under Farm Bill program spending, more than 80% is allocated to food assistance in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and 20% to farm support, which includes conservation assistance. Food safety and inspection spending is mostly funded by appropriations for salaries and expenses of USDA employees to do the inspection work, rather than programmatic funding like farm support or food assistance. USDA reported about \$1.4 billion for the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and about \$2.6 billion for the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). This is a small amount of the overall USDA budget (\$287 billion in FY2023), but a larger share (14.3%) of the approximately \$28 to \$32 billion in discretionary funding (USDA-OBPA, "[Budget Summary](#)").



Interestingly, mean allocations shifted considerably over the last three years. Notably, food assistance experienced a significant increase (+10% change) in its mean allocation, while farm support and natural resources and environment both experienced 9% decreases in their mean allocations. Food safety and inspection also saw a small increase (+4%) in public support, while mean allocations for research and education and rural development remained relatively stable.

These changes in public perception are useful to compare against changes in policy. For example, the changes to farm and food policy in the Reconciliation Farm Bill, which was included in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (P.L. [119-21](#)) were different: spending on food assistance was reduced by 20%, while spending on farm support increased by 40% according to the projections by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO, [July 21, 2025](#)). As another example, the federal administration's proposed budget included a funding reduction for food safety and inspection, cutting nearly 23% in funding for the combined budgets of FSIS and APHIS, most of it from APHIS.

We also compare changes in spending preferences by political affiliation. Table 1 lists the changes in support, as measured by the percent change in the mean allocation of a hypothetical \$100, from wave 1 (May 2022) to wave 14 (August 2025) by political affiliation. Over the last three years, support for food assistance increased for all three groups, with the largest change coming from Democrats (+15%). Similarly, mean allocations for food safety and inspection increased across all three political affiliations, again with the largest change coming from Democrats (+8%). Also of note, Republicans increased support for rural development by 24%, the largest percentage change for any category and political group.

To cover increased allocations in these areas, both Republicans and Democrats reduced their funding allocations for farm support. This was a 19% decrease in mean allocation for Republicans and a 9% decrease for Democrats. Democrats also decreased allocations (-13%) for natural resources and environment. Participants who identified as Independent/Other allocated their dollars a bit differently. These individuals exhibited funding decreases for rural development (-13%) and natural resources and environment (-9%). Further, this group was the only one to increase the mean funding allocated to farm support (+7%).

Table 1. Percent Change in Mean Allocation of USDA Funds from Wave 1 (May 2022) to Wave 14 (August 2025) by Political Affiliation

<i>Budget Category</i>	<i>Republicans</i>	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Independents/Other</i>
Farm Support	-19%	-9%	+7%
Food Assistance	+7%	+15%	+5%
Food Safety & Inspection	+3%	+8%	+1%
Natural Resources & Environment	-3%	-13%	-9%
Research and Education	+9%	-7%	-1%
Rural Development	+24%	-4%	-13%

Note: Percent change calculated as $(\text{Mean}_{\text{Aug. 2025}} - \text{Mean}_{\text{May 2022}}) / \text{Mean}_{\text{May 2022}}$

We also asked participants which USDA spending category they view as *most* important. Food safety and inspection topped the list in both May 2022 and August 2025. In wave 14, 35% of participants indicated this was the most important budget category, up from 29% in wave 1. Food assistance also experienced an increase in the share of participants rating it as most important. In wave 14, 28% indicated they viewed food assistance as most important, up from 22% in wave 1. All other categories experienced reductions in perceived importance among consumers, with farm support experiencing a 6-percentage point decline from 24% in May 2022 to 18% in August 2025.

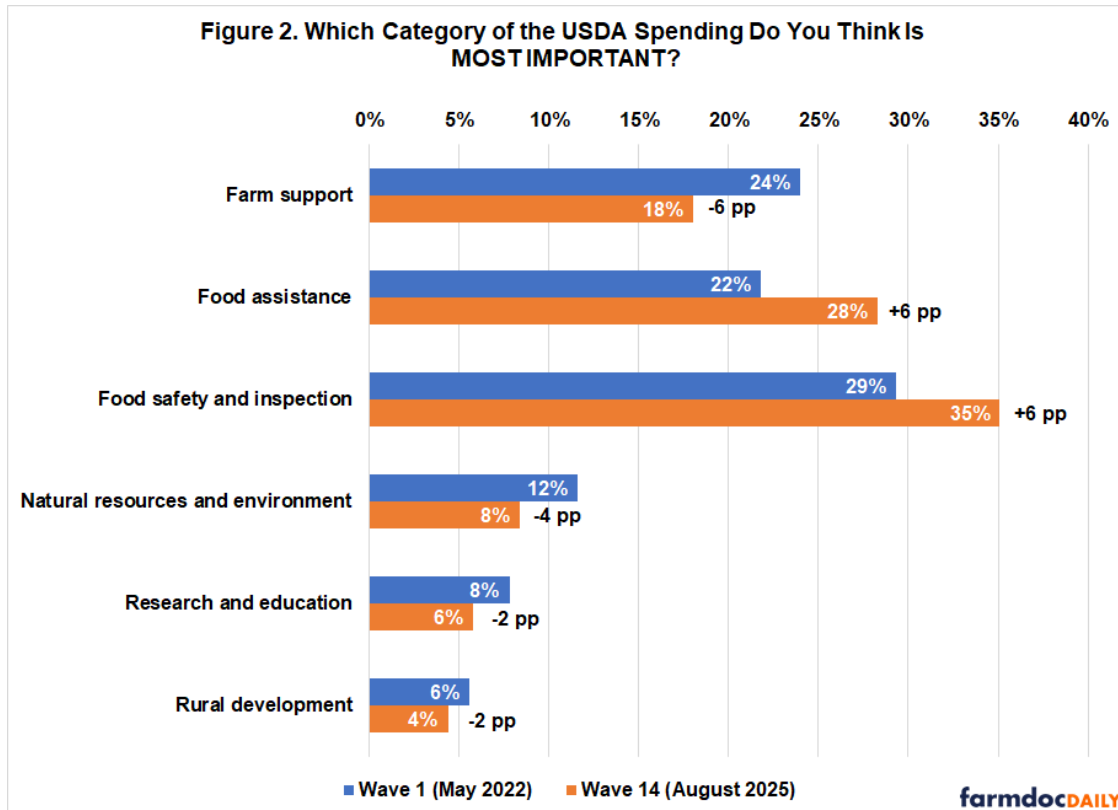


Table 2 shows the change in priorities by political party affiliation, reporting the percentage point (pp) increase or decrease for each spending category for Republican, Democrat, and Independent/Other participants. Here, we see that Republican and Democrat respondents reported that food safety and inspection was most important at higher rates in August 2025 at the expense of other programs, in

particular farm support (amongst both groups) and natural resources and environment (amongst Democrats). Democrats and Independent/Other respondents also reported food assistance being most important at higher rates.

Table 2. Percentage Point Change in Importance from Wave 1 (May 2022) to Wave 14 (August 2025) by Political Affiliation

<i>Budget Category</i>	<i>Republicans</i>	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Independents/Other</i>
Farm Support	-6 pp	-8 pp	-4 pp
Food Assistance	-1 pp	+13 pp	+7 pp
Food Safety & Inspection	+8 pp	+9 pp	0 pp
Natural Resources & Environment	-1 pp	-9 pp	+2 pp
Research and Education	-3 pp	-3 pp	0 pp
Rural Development	+2 pp	-1 pp	-5 pp

Note: Percentage point (pp) change calculated as $\text{Mean}_{\text{Aug. 2025}} - \text{Mean}_{\text{May 2022}}$.

Conclusion

Spending priorities are changing substantially under the current administration and the 119th Congress. An important question for public policy is whether those changes align with the public's preferences and priorities. We use results from the GFAPS, where we asked respondents to allocate a hypothetical \$100 to the USDA's six budget categories: (1) farm support, (2) food assistance, (3) food safety and inspection, (4) natural resources and environment, (5) research and education, and (6) rural development. We use results from May 2022 and August 2025 to evaluate changes in public perceptions of USDA priorities. In both waves, consumers continued to have the highest levels of support for three USDA spending categories: farm support, food assistance, and food safety and inspection.

Over the last three years, however, public priorities for the USDA have experienced some significant shifts. In particular, respondents increased their preferred funding allocations for food assistance (+10% change). Food assistance comprises the lion's share of the USDA budget and Farm Bill spending; however, it received the largest reduction in spending as projected by the Congressional Budget Office. At the same time, public allocations for spending on farm support declined in the last three years (-9% change), but Congress increased that spending substantially. Respondents also decreased allocations for natural resources and the environment. Changes in respondents' allocations may indicate frustration with the changes in spending.

Finally, while food safety and inspection accounts for a relatively trivial share of the total USDA budget—but a larger share of discretionary spending on salaries and expenses—the public wants food safety and inspection to be a priority. In August 2025, 35% of participants said this was the USDA's *most* important budget category, up from 29% three years ago. The proposed USDA budget indicates that the Administration is proposing to go in the opposite direction by reducing staff and spending on these services.

How this all plays out in the ongoing public debate and the implications of these changes remain to be seen. In addition, we continue to see changes that may affect public perceptions of USDA priorities – for example, the recent announcement in the [Wall Street Journal](#) that USDA will no longer collect data on food insecurity in the U.S. may impact public support for research and education. We will continue to monitor the public's response to these timely agricultural and food policy issues.

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