

Rural communities rely on this USDA agency. Trump’s cuts threaten that

By Frank Morris
[Harvest Public Media](#)

The USDA’s Rural Development agency has provided billions of dollars each year to small towns, farmers, and businesses. Now staffing upheaval and budget cuts brought on by the Trump administration may be eating into the agency’s effectiveness.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development is Washington’s chief tool to promote economic growth in rural counties — providing funding for everything from renovating old hospitals to providing faster internet service.

Sometimes the agency sweeps in to clean up an urgent mess.

For instance, last year in Dunklin County, in Missouri’s Bootheel, a sewer system failure sent raw sewage churning up out of residents’ toilets, into their homes and flowing through their yards.

“We had to get this issue taken care of, and within a few weeks, we had a million-dollar emergency grant for that wastewater plant that was run in part by the county and in a city down there so they could start fixing that as quickly as possible,” Kyle Wilkens said.

Wilkens ran USDA Rural Development in Missouri under President Joe Biden and says the agency spent \$4.6 billion in Missouri alone over the past four years.

Now the funding and support is likely to slow.

The Trump Administration’s Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, first pressed USDA Rural Development employees to retire, then terminated hundreds. Now courts are forcing the agency to rehire workers with back pay — at least temporarily.

“Think of the time that you’re taken away from these folks doing their actual job and that is money,” said Wilkens. “It’s all it is. It’s money.”

The agency does things local governments can’t afford in places without many options.

“In a lot of these communities, USDA Rural Development is the most important partner,” said Owen Hart with the National Association of Counties. “You can’t rely on private investment coming in. The market’s just not there for it. You can’t rely on philanthropy, like you can in a lot of urban areas to meet some of these needs. It is a really, really crucial partner to a lot of these folks.”

On the farm

While Trump won the vote in rural counties by an average of two-thirds, the administration has frozen funding for many rural-focused projects, including grants for solar power paid for through Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act and distributed through Rural Development.

The USDA has since released portions of that funding, but some farmers awarded grants last year are still waiting for the 50% federal reimbursement for money they spent upfront installing solar power.

USDA Rural Development is rooted in the Great Depression, when the Rural Electrification Administration brought power lines to hundreds of remote communities. The agency has sustained thousands of towns over the decades, often by supporting the businesses and farms that bring money into the local economy.

It did that for Batchelder Family Farms. Brad and Jenna Batchelder, with help from their four kids, raise bison, cattle, pigs and poultry

near Belton, Missouri.

“It was really almost life changing for us,” said Batchelder.

Five years ago, big meat packing plants shut down as the COVID pandemic swept through the workforce. That triggered a meat shortage. Suddenly strangers were driving up Batchelder’s long driveway to ask if he could sell them a few cuts of meat.

Brad and his wife Jenna Batchelder saw an opportunity to expand their business by selling the meat they produce to retail customers. But going from raising livestock to processing the meat into individual cuts, packaging that and marketing it is an enormous step.

“And we needed an updated website. We needed shipping availability. How do you ship? What’s the best way to ship? How do you get your name out there?” Jenna recalled asking.

After a long series of consultations and an extensive grant application, USDA Rural Development gave the Batchelders a grant to cover half the cost of getting their pork, beef and buffalo meat processed into steaks and other cuts and to start selling meat themselves. Jenna Batchelder says the staff also provided a crash course in business education.

“They were kind of getting us started, but also giving us the platform to kind of go on our own afterwards, and giving us the tools and the knowledge that we needed,” said Jenna.

Now Brad and Jenna are running a busy shop out of the corner of their barn. The \$242,000 grant the government provided flows through the local community to butchers and suppliers. Their farm brings money into rural Cass County from nearby Kansas City, and the food supply chain becomes a little more robust and a bit more sustainable.

“These grants that are provided for us give us the tools to do it the right way and to get our food

out to people, get them local, you know, healthy farm-raised food that people are looking for,” Jenna said.

Kyle Wilkens credits outcomes like this to his former staff at USDA Rural Development Missouri. He said the crew there, at least before the cuts and turmoil, was deeply dedicated.

“Every person we brought on had a specific job, a specific meaning to what they were doing. They loved what they did, because

not only were they working for the country,” said Wilkens, “they were working for their neighbors.”

Now he worries that a diminished and demoralized staff won’t be able to tackle the workload.

This story was produced in partnership with [Harvest Public Media](#), a collaboration of public media newsrooms in the Midwest. It reports on food systems, agriculture and rural issues.

Legal Notice

City of Leoti

NOTICE OF CITY COUNCIL VACANCY

The City of Leoti is accepting letters of interest to fill a vacancy on the Leoti City Council. The term of office will begin immediately upon appointment and continue through January 6, 2026, completing the previous councilor’s term.

Qualifications:

Those interested must be 18 years of age, a registered voter, and a resident of the City of Leoti for at least 12 months prior to appointment. A letter of interest should be sent to the City of Leoti, Council Vacancy, PO Drawer 7E, Leoti, KS 67861 or by email at leoticityclerk@wbsnet.org.

Other Information:

The appointed person shall serve in the position until a qualified person is elected in the 2025 Election. Letters of interest will be accepted until a qualified person is appointed.

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SEARCH

Find the words hidden vertically, horizontally, diagonally, and backwards.

WORDS

ACTIVITY
ATTENTION
COGNITIVE
CRASH
DANGEROUS
DISTRACTED
DRIVER
DROWSY
EATING
HIGHWAY
INJURY
MANUAL
MANUAL
NOISY
PASSENGER
RADIO
READING
SAFETY
SPEED
TALKING
TEXTING
VEHICLE
VISUAL

Solutions to all puzzles on Page 5

CLUES ACROSS

- 1. Narrow piece of wood
- 5. African desert
- 11. Waxy covering on birds’ beaks
- 12. Sour
- 16. Infrequent
- 17. Former AL MVP Vaughn
- 18. Policemen wear one
- 19. Out of the question
- 24. Used to chop
- 25. Symptoms
- 26. Not moving
- 27. Folk singer DiFranco
- 28. Comedian Armisen
- 29. Quantitative fact
- 30. Incline from vertical
- 31. Scottish musician
- 33. Rooney and Kate are two
- 34. Positioned
- 38. A very short time
- 39. Tropical American shrubs
- 40. Yemen capital
- 43. Spanish municipality
- 44. Medical professionals
- 45. Fibrous material
- 49. Confined condition (abbr.)
- 50. Without covering
- 51. “Mad Men” honcho Don
- 53. Hockey position

CLUES DOWN

- 1. Unshaven facial hair
- 2. More thin
- 3. Show up
- 4. Seethed
- 5. Ancient Greek city
- 6. Poisonous plant
- 7. Hello
- 8. College sports official
- 9. Monetary unit of Russia
- 10. Wings
- 13. Take too much of a substance
- 14. A citizen of Uganda
- 15. Most appealing
- 20. Atomic #18
- 21. Global investment bank (abbr.)
- 22. Jewish calendar month
- 23. Popular sandwich
- 27. Swiss river

CLUES DOWN

- 29. Incorrect letters
- 30. Popular entree
- 31. Foot (Latin)
- 32. A driver’s license is one form
- 33. Extinct flightless bird
- 34. Appetizer
- 35. After battles
- 36. It neutralizes alkalis
- 37. Beverage container
- 38. Partner to “Pa”
- 40. Gray American rail
- 41. Salt of acetic acid
- 42. Canadian province
- 44. Dish made with lentils
- 45. Narrative poem of popular origin
- 46. For each one
- 47. Come to terms
- 48. Test
- 50. More dishonorable
- 51. Unit of loudness
- 52. The Ocean State
- 54. Monetary unit in Mexico
- 55. Lying down
- 57. Thus
- 61. Where LA is located
- 62. Western State

