



June 9, 2026

Mr. John Walk
USDA Office of Inspector General
Room 117-W Jamie Whitten Bldg
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Re: Request for Probe into USDA's Fundraising Efforts for 250th Anniversary Programming

Dear Inspector General Walk,

I am writing to request that your office investigate whether:

1. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) inappropriately solicited gifts from private companies to fund the Great American Farmers Market in 2025, as well as upcoming events like the Great American State Fair;
2. The National Forest Foundation (NFF) is being used to circumvent restrictions on accepting gifts and funding;
3. USDA personnel and resources are being misused to support Freedom250, a partisan private entity established by the Trump administration;
4. The Freedom250 activities marketed and supported by USDA and NFF are consistent with Freedom250's stated charitable purpose and the IRS code;
5. USDA's promotion and purchase of Freedom250 branded merchandise is a corrupt pocket-lining exercise for administration allies; and
6. USDA is inappropriately using Special Government Employees (SGEs) and/or granting non-personnel access to government email domains.

The public deserves to know whether the USDA is expending its resources and funds in ways that compromise its core mission, or constitutes waste, fraud, abuse or mismanagement of taxpayers' funds. We are especially concerned about the overtly partisan nature of Freedom 250 and the improper mixing of federal funds and private monies.

A thorough, independent review of USDA's actions with respect to the Great American Farmers Market in 2025 and in upcoming Great American State Fair and other USDA activities around Freedom 250 would serve both to create accountability and build public trust in our government institutions.

Background

In August 2025, USDA hosted the Great American Farmers Market to pay tribute to the nation's



farmers, ranchers, and producers. The event, which took place on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., drew in a variety of vendors, sponsors, government officials (including USDA Secretary Brooke Rollins), and other participants.

In addition to last summer's event, USDA is currently planning and preparing for additional programming in celebration of America's 250th anniversary, including the Great American State Fair—a 16-day event on the National Mall starting on June 25, 2026, and Great American Rodeo events across the country.

Recently, several performers slated to perform at the Great American State Fair dropped out of participating, claiming that they were misled about the organizers of the event. The announcements drew attention to the fact that the event is being hosted as part of Freedom250 programming, instead of the bipartisan and congressionally appropriated initiative America250. Unlike America250, Freedom250 is a partisan Trump-backed private entity that was established in December 2025 as a Delaware Corporation by the Trump administration and has assumed many of the functions of America 250.

The New York Times and other news outlets have reported that the Trump administration is selling access through Freedom250 to events around the United States' 250th anniversary to the highest bidder. In addition, PEER has received complaints that employees at some agencies are being pressured to include Freedom250 logos and links in the email signatures of their official email accounts – a possible violation of the Hatch Act and the employee's First Amendment rights against compelled speech.

Recent coverage, along with information obtained by PEER, suggests that USDA may be inappropriately using government personnel and resources to plan and promote Freedom250 programming. Additionally, responses to congressional inquiry warrant further investigation into how the non-profit National Forest Foundation (NFF) is being used to house and distribute funds for USDA programming through a fund called USDA's Secretary's Priorities Fund at the NFF.

Specifically, PEER requests that USDA OIG look into:

1. Whether USDA improperly solicited gifts from private companies to fund 250th anniversary programming

Correspondence obtained by PEER through a Freedom of Information Act request suggests that USDA staff, including Secretary Brooke Rollins herself, solicited funds from various companies to support the 2025 Great American Farmers Market. USDA secured sponsorships

from Tractor Supply Co., John Deere, Visa, and Chobani, as announced in a USDA press release.

Further information on how USDA communicated with and solicited funds from private sponsors is necessary to assess whether the Department followed all guidelines and regulations governing the solicitation and acceptance of gifts (including, but not limited to, 7 U.S.C. §2269 and Dept. Reg. 5200-003), and how vendors and sponsors were chosen for the event. This is important because some event sponsors had active USDA contracts¹ raising the issue of whether those being solicited to become sponsors experience pressure to donate to protect their business prospects with the government.

2. How USDA is using the National Forest Foundation to fund its 250th anniversary programming, and whether doing so circumvents restrictions on soliciting and accepting gifts

The NFF was chartered by Congress in 1992 to be the official non-profit partner of the United States Forest Service. The NFF leverages private partnerships to support conservation projects in areas related to wildfire resilience, recreation enhancement, and land and watershed restoration.

However, it has recently come to light that the NFF is seemingly being used to collect and distribute funds for USDA programming, including the 2025 Great American Farmer’s Market and potentially the Great American State Fair.²

Dieter Fenkar-Froeschl, President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Forest Foundation (NFF), confirmed that NFF accepted sponsorships from Tractor Supply Co., Chobani, John Deere, and Visa, the exact same companies listed as sponsors for the 2025 Great American Farmer’s Market. The sponsors each contributed at least \$250,000 to the “USDA Secretary’s Priorities” fund, which enables the Secretary to support initiatives directly aligned with the mission and priorities of the USDA Forest Service. While the 2025 Great American Farmer’s Market dedicated a day to “Forest and Firefighters”, it is unclear how the event—which included entire days on “Faith and Fellowship” and “Making America

¹ In fiscal year 2025 and 2026, Chobani had a combined total of nearly \$20 million in USDA awarded contracts and Deere & Company (including subsidiaries) had a combined total of over \$5.2 million.

² The paragraphs below refer to information shared in response to Ranking Member Maxine Dexter’s Questions for the Record directed at the National Forest Foundation following the February 10, 2026 House Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing “*All in for America250: Public-Private Partnerships Supporting America’s Semiqucentennial on our Public Lands.*”

Healthy Again”—demonstrated a clear nexus to the mission of the NFF and the United States Forest Service (USFS).

Furthermore, Mr. Fenkar-Froeschl stated that to NFF’s knowledge, USDA did not direct, request, or suggest that the National Forest Foundation accept or receive any contribution for a specific purpose, deliverable, or performance. Yet, it seems implausible that staff in the USDA Office of the Secretary were soliciting sponsorships for the 2025 Great American Farmer’s Market without a mechanism for collecting funds already in place.

Given USDA’s upcoming 250th anniversary programming, especially the Great American State Fair, further investigation is required to determine whether:

- NFF is being directed by this administration to accept funds for a specific purpose;
- The Secretary’s Priorities Fund is being used to support partisan programming and initiatives unrelated to the priorities of USFS;
- USDA is using the NFF to circumvent restrictions on accepting gifts.

3. Whether USDA staff, resources, or infrastructure are being used improperly to support Freedom 250 initiatives and programming

On July 3, 2025, USDA Secretary Rollins issued a proclamation encouraging state fairs across the nation to serve as “patriotic centers of celebration for America250.”³ However, the USDA website suggests that upcoming celebrations, including the Great American State Fair, are being hosted as Freedom250 events.⁴ Unlike America250 programming, part of a congressionally appropriated bipartisan initiative, Freedom250 is a private entity whose programming and educational materials push a partisan agenda.

USDA has actively embraced and promoted Freedom250 initiatives, even publishing a letter encouraging state fairs to incorporate Freedom250 branding and merchandise at their events. Given the prevalence of Freedom250 on USDA’s website and advertisements for upcoming programming, we call on you to investigate whether government personnel, resources, and

³ Although the proclamation itself references America250, USDA’s webpage states that Secretary Rollins called on state fairs to adopt Freedom250 programming. This conflation of initiatives was recently highlighted when several artists dropped out of performing at the Great American State Fair due to its partisan skew.

⁴ Information about upcoming USDA celebratory events is housed under the webpage <https://www.usda.gov/freedom250>.

infrastructure are being used to support a private entity and its partisan initiatives.⁵ USDA programs and staffing are already suffering from dramatic cuts. Any diversion of resources to support Freedom250 initiatives, would not only be illegal, but it would further compromise USDA's ability to carry out its mission and support American farmers and communities.

4. Whether the Freedom250 activities and marketing being supported and promoted by USDA and NFF are consistent with its charitable purpose

Given that USDA is actively promoting and may be using resources and personnel for Freedom250 events and initiatives, it is pertinent to determine whether this programming is consistent at large with Freedom250's established charitable purposes and the IRS code.

In filings with the District of Columbia, Freedom250 has described itself as "the official non-profit, non-partisan subsidiary of the National Park Foundation" and stated that the entity's purpose is to "Support & promote the activities of the National Parks [sic] Foundation."⁶

5. Whether USDA's promotion and purchases of Freedom250 branded merchandise is a corrupt pocket-lining exercises for administration allies

Official Freedom250 branded merchandise is sold through a storefront at <https://shop.freedom250.org/>. The contact information provided for this storefront is a P.O. Box in Louisiana that is also used by the branded merchandise manufacturer and seller Ace Specialties.⁷ Ace Specialties is noted as a partisan "One-stop solution for American-made merchandise for Republicans" and a prior official merchandiser for Trump political campaigns.⁸ Given the apparent identity of Freedom250's official merchandise supplier, investigation is required to determine whether USDA promotion of Freedom250 merchandise to state fairs also knowingly or unknowingly serves to directly lines the pockets of a partisan ally of the administration.

6. If, and how, USDA is using Special Government Employees (SGEs) and/or granting non-personnel access to government email domains in relation to 250th anniversary programming

⁵ PEER is aware of at least one USDA employee, Carlee Tousman (Carlee.Tousman@usda.gov) who is listed as the point of contact for states to confirm their participation in Freedom 250 celebrations, and to coordinate Freedom 250 merch tents and artist booking at Great American Rodeo events.

⁶ See <https://corponline.dlcp.dc.gov/homepage/business-search> for Freedom250 LLC, D.C. Biennial Report for Domestic & Foreign Filing Entity, Section VI. Purpose, filed March 25, 2026.

⁷ See <https://shop.freedom250.org/policies/contact-information> (archived at <https://archive.is/Dgw9l>); see also <https://www.casinovendors.com/vendor/ace-specialties-llc/>

⁸ See <https://winred.com/product-catalog/ace-specialties>; see also <https://www.businessinsider.com/make-america-great-again-hat-christl-mahfouz-ace-specialties-trump-campaign-merchandise-2018-7>



The assignment and use of government email domains and the hiring of Special Government Employees are both strictly governed by regulations and ethics rules. Correspondence obtained by PEER raises red flags about non-USDA personnel communicating and conducting work on behalf of the Department.

Correspondence obtained via a FOIA request shows an America First Policy Institute (AFPI) employee, Ashley Hayek, listed as the team lead for the Great American Farmer’s Market “Faith and Fellowship Tuesday”. Ms. Hayek is also cc’d on event-related correspondence under a government email domain (Ashely.Hayek@usda.gov). To our knowledge, Ms. Hayek has no public affiliation with USDA; therefore, we ask the OIG to confirm whether Ms. Hayek was appropriately hired to work on USDA matters, and whether use of an official government domain is proper. AFPI is also an official Freedom250 partner.

If your office needs any additional information about the concerns raised in this letter, please do not hesitate to contact me. We will provide all supporting documentation upon request.

Sincerely,

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