



June 30, 2021

**VIA EMAIL**

Christin Kamm  
Public Information Officer  
Nebraska Department of Agriculture  
301 Centennial Mall South  
P.O. Box 94947  
Lincoln, NE 68509-4947  
[christin.kamm@nebraska.gov](mailto:christin.kamm@nebraska.gov)

**Re: Public Records Statute Request**

Dear Record Custodian:

Pursuant to the Nebraska Public Records Statutes, Neb. Rev. Stat. §§ 84-712 et seq., American Oversight makes the following request for records.

Public records obtained by American Oversight from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) include correspondence between news media, meatpacking companies, and the USDA regarding management of COVID-19 cases in Nebraska meatpacking facilities.<sup>1</sup> In these emails, USDA officials suggest that Governor Pete Ricketts worked with news organizations to produce favorable stories about the safety of meatpacking facilities in Grand Island in order to manage community concerns about workers' safety.<sup>2</sup> In an April 20, 2020 email, Joby Young, USDA Chief of Staff, wrote, "Governor Ricketts worked with JBS and Nebraska Cattlemen to get a local TV station and newspaper to the plant in Grand Island . . . It seems [the hyperlinked] stories were effective is [sic] managing the community concerns about the plant."<sup>3</sup>

American Oversight seeks records with the potential to shed light on the extent of the Nebraska administration's communications with protein industry entities.

**Requested Records**

American Oversight requests that your office produce the following records within four business days:

All email communications (including complete email chains, email attachments, calendar invitations, and attachments thereto) sent by (a) any of the Nebraska Department of Agriculture officials listed in Column A to (b) any of the external

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<sup>1</sup> *USDA Communications with Protein Industry Groups Part 1*, American Oversight, 276 (2021), <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/7204640-USDA-20-0964-A>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*



entities listed in Column B, including anyone communicating with an email address ending in the listed email domains:

| Column A: Nebraska Department of Agriculture Officials                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Column B: External Entities                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Director Steve Wellman, or anyone communicating on his behalf, such as a scheduler or assistant</li> <li>2. Assistant Director Amelia Breinig</li> <li>3. Operations Director Brent Davis</li> <li>4. Communications Director Christin Kamm</li> <li>5. Agricultural Promotion Coordinator, Casey Foster</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. JBS (@jbssa.com)</li> <li>2. Nebraska Cattlemen (necattlemen.org)</li> <li>3. Smithfield Foods (@smithfield.com or @smithfieldfoods.com)</li> <li>4. National Consumer Brands Association (@consumerbrandsassociation.org).</li> <li>5. Tyson Foods (@tyson.com)</li> <li>6. Cargill (@cargill.com)</li> <li>7. Pilgrim’s Pride (@pilgrims.com)</li> <li>8. National Pork Producers Council (@nppc.org)</li> <li>9. American Association of Meat Processors (@aamp.com)</li> <li>10. National Chicken Council (@chickenusa.org)</li> <li>11. North American Meat Institute (@meatinstitute.org)</li> <li>12. National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (@ncba.org)</li> <li>13. Sysco Corporation (@sysco.com)</li> <li>14. Perdue Farms, Inc. (@perdue.com)</li> <li>15. Seaboard Foods (@seaboardfoods.com)</li> </ol> |

Please provide all responsive records from March 1, 2020, to the date the search is conducted.

In an effort to accommodate your agency and reduce the number of potentially responsive records to be processed and produced, American Oversight has limited its request to emails sent by the specified officials. To be clear, however, American Oversight still requests that complete email chains be produced, displaying both sent and received messages. This means, for example, that both a specified official’s response to an email from one of the listed email domains and the initial received message are responsive to this request and should be produced.

Please notify American Oversight of any anticipated fees or costs in excess of \$100 prior to incurring such costs or fee. Pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. § 84-712(3)(b), we further request that any fees are limited to the actual costs and exclude fees for search time in excess of four hours.

## **Guidance Regarding the Search & Processing of Requested Records**

In connection with its request for records, American Oversight provides the following guidance regarding the scope of the records sought and the search and processing of records:

- Our request for records includes any attachments to those records or other materials enclosed with those records when they were previously transmitted. To the extent that an email is responsive to our request, our request includes all prior messages sent or received in that email chain, as well as any attachments to the email.
- Please search all relevant records or systems containing records regarding agency business. Do not exclude records regarding agency business contained in files, email accounts, or devices in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts.
- In the event some portions of the requested records are properly exempt from disclosure, please disclose any reasonably segregable non-exempt portions of the requested records.<sup>4</sup> If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically why it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.
- Please take appropriate steps to ensure that records responsive to this request are not deleted by the agency before the completion of processing for this request. If records potentially responsive to this request are likely to be located on systems where they are subject to potential deletion, including on a scheduled basis, please take steps to prevent that deletion, including, as appropriate, by instituting a litigation hold on those records.

If you have any questions regarding how to construe this request communications records or believe that further discussions regarding search and processing would facilitate a more efficient production of records of interest to American Oversight, please do not hesitate to contact American Oversight to discuss this request. American Oversight welcomes an opportunity to discuss its request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or duplication costs. By working together at the outset, American Oversight and your agency can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in an electronic format by email. Alternatively, please provide responsive material in native format or in PDF format on a USB drive. Please send any responsive material being sent by mail to American Oversight, 1030 15th Street NW, Suite B255, Washington, DC 20005. If it will accelerate release of responsive records to American Oversight, please also provide responsive material on a rolling basis.

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<sup>4</sup> Neb. Rev. Stat. § 84-712.06.

## Conclusion

American Oversight is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit with the mission to promote transparency in government, to educate the public about government activities, and to ensure the accountability of government officials. American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media. American Oversight also makes materials it gathers available on its public website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.<sup>5</sup>

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with your agency on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, please contact Emma Lewis at [records@americanoversight.org](mailto:records@americanoversight.org) or 202.539.6507.

Sincerely,

*/s/ Emma Lewis*

Emma Lewis on behalf of American Oversight.

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<sup>5</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 15,600 page likes on Facebook and 106,200 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited June 17, 2021); American Oversight (@weareoversight), Twitter, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited June 17, 2021).