
USDA AND THE DRP

The truth behind the “voluntary” choices made by USDA employees

OCTOBER 29, 2025
BRAVE FORMER USDA EMPLOYEES
Across the United States

Preface

To all who read this anthology:

The following pages come from the brave, hard-working former U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) employees who voluntarily chose to share their Deferred Retirement Program (DRP) stories with me over the last two months in response to my LinkedIn posts requesting them. For all of them, taking the DRP was anything but “voluntary,” it was one of the hardest decisions they have ever made. It was also the only choice many were led to believe they had based upon the communication, or rather lack of, provided by Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins and her political appointees. Secretary Rollins and her staff forcefully encouraged as many USDA employees to take the DRP as possible with the emails supporting the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) effort and the infamous “Fork in the Road” email that announced the first DRP. The persistent rumor mill about personnel cuts ranging from 25 percent in some agencies to the complete elimination of some administrative offices like the Office of the Executive Secretariat reached a fever pitch prior to the second DRP being offered, and Secretary Rollins and her staff did nothing to quell them or clarify where the cuts were planned. With that lack of clarity and transparency from her office, many USDA employees with more than 10 years of exceptional service decided that the second DRP was the safest option for them and their families despite their misgivings about leaving an organization they dearly loved. They not only lost paychecks, but they and their families endured emotional trauma throughout the entire process. These are people, not numbers, but Secretary Rollins appeared not to care about them as human beings through her actions throughout the process.

As you will read in the following pages, many who took the DRP have regrets about taking it and wish that they had been provided clarity about the USDA reorganization that was announced shortly after the second DRP election period ended. If they had, some have said that they would have made a different decision and remained with USDA. For others, Sept. 30 was a day of mourning and sorrow as they signed their final retirement packages and ended their federal civil service careers with barely a whimper instead of retirement certificates and celebrations like they deserved for all their years of exceptional, faithful service to USDA and the nation. Secretary Rollins didn’t care about giving them their proper due and respect on their last day any more than she did on the days when she exhorted as many USDA employees as possible to take the DRP.

Some have chosen to let their names be used; while others have chosen to use their initials or remain anonymous out of fear of what the current administration might do to them and their families. I have respected their wishes in this anthology. Their stories need to be heard, and here they are.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Charles H. Melton'.

Charles H. Melton
Former USDA employee
Texas Tech Class of 1998

Jameal Clark's Story dated September 30, 2025

Today marks the end of my career—more than 20 years of service in the federal government. I spent my career with one agency, the Department of Agriculture (USDA), an agency I took to heart because of my family's deep connection to it. 🌱 From the Extension Department in Virginia to my grandfather's life as a tobacco farmer, to simply living the “green life” all my life, USDA was not just my employer—it was part of my family's legacy. I carried that with pride and tried to embody what the department stood for and offered to communities across this nation. ❤️

That's why the way I was treated cuts so deeply. 💔 The way I was pushed out—as though my contributions and dedication meant nothing—hurts my soul to its core. I now have to shift my mindset and learn to live differently after years of hard work and sacrifice. Even though my standard of living never quite matched that of many others, I was still grateful and gave my very best for the American people. 🙏 I wanted to serve with excellence and dignity, and I believed in the mission.

But with the stroke of a pen ✍️, this administration dismissed that commitment. They promised they would never do such a thing. They promised to value us, to respect us, to uphold our dignity. Instead, in their so-called effort to “drain the swamp” 🦟, they swept away people like me—professionals of color who gave their all. It felt like the goal was to erase our presence, to deny that we had anything meaningful to contribute. They assumed that because we were Black 🖤, our intelligence, our service, and our worth didn't matter. That could not be further from the truth. We gave our minds, our skills, and our hearts ❤️ to this country.

The DRP program, in particular, did nothing to support us. ❌ All it did was give the appearance that we were “collecting a check” 💵 while we scrambled to figure out our next move without any real support. We are applying for jobs, but no one wants to hire someone with our experience—they assume we are “overqualified” or that we'll leave as soon as a new opportunity comes along. 🙄 Where does that leave us? Out to dry. 🚰 And that is exactly what the program—and the administration—seems designed to do.

They say they want new ideas, innovation, and fresh energy in the workplace 💡. But innovation cannot thrive without the bridge of mentorship that only experienced workers provide. By ushering thousands of seasoned professionals out with a stroke of a pen, they

destroyed that bridge 🏰. Now, younger workers who bring new ideas risk being overwhelmed, unsupported, and left to navigate complex challenges without guidance. 😞 The DRP burned the opportunity for older and younger generations to meet in the middle, share knowledge, and sustain institutional wisdom. The administration failed to understand that this mentorship has always been a cornerstone of the federal workforce, and it's something we urgently need to restore. 🔄

And now, with so many of us gone, there is a gaping hole that no one will be able to fill—not tomorrow, not by October 1, and perhaps not for years to come. 🕒 I am heartbroken. I am grieving. I am deeply saddened that after so much time, loyalty, and service, this is how my career ends. 😞

So now I ask: where do we go from here? 😞

Anonymous Story No. 1

My career with USDA began a few weeks after my college graduation in 2002 when I was hired as a Research Technician in the Agricultural Research Service (ARS). I excelled in and enjoyed this role working towards a sustainable food supply and was promoted four times until I reached the maximum grade level for the series. Opportunities for advancement within ARS were few and far between, so I began searching for roles in other mission areas. I was thrilled when I was selected for a role in another USDA agency. While my new management was based in the South Building, I was hired as fully remote with my midsize city in the Mid-South as my assigned duty station. Again, I excelled in my new role implementing process improvements for increased efficiency and data capture. I received a promotion after one year and was told by my supervisor and manager that they were impressed with my work and had big plans for me.

When the return-to-office orders started coming down, I initially wasn't concerned. There are five USDA offices in my city and within a 5-mile radius of my home – including my old ARS office. Surely one of them would have a desk for me, I thought. As February crept by, it became increasingly apparent that other mission areas were not going to volunteer space for personnel who were not their own. On March 5, I was informed by my manager that I would start reporting to the closest agency office on Monday, March 10. The closest agency office is over 65 miles away in a suburb of a larger city. For the next four weeks, I commuted over 130 miles daily to do a remote job, where I spent my entire workday in a cubicle working on my laptop and joining Teams meetings with personnel across the country. I had little reason to interact with anyone in my assigned office, other than greeting them in the hall. During this period, I was restless from spending so much time sitting and also experienced insomnia. While my job had always been extremely busy and was often stressful, working from home provided a balance that made the stress bearable. By taking remote work away and adding a lengthy interstate commute, my days became intolerable. When DRP 2.0 was offered, I did not hesitate to tender my resignation.

While I still grieve the unplanned end of my 23-year USDA career and am uncertain about what the future holds for me, I am looking forward to no longer being an executive branch employee on October 1. I would rather work against this administration than for it.

KG's Story

I was a Forest Service employee in Albuquerque, New Mexico and by the time I will have officially given my resignation September 30, I will have worked for the Forest Service (FS) three years and two months. I was a financial analyst and a qualified Public Information Officer (for fire assignments).

I was initially drawn to the FS for its mission statement, values, dedicated chief, and professional growth opportunities. My decision to accept the DRP program was due to all of those being cut. I was also facing extreme stress receiving the emails saying my job was not safe, and having to report my work every week to an unprotected email inbox at the request of DOGE. I was also extremely disheartened by the new chief cancelling town halls, replaced with 5 minute videos, I felt as though no one would listen to our concerns and they were essentially showing through actions they would not give a place to vocalize our feelings and views. After attending an OPM course on reduction in force, I learned having no preference (disability or veterans) and being with the agency for such a short time, that I would not be safe if they continued with the measures, despite having excellent performance reviews. I made the decision based on the fact that my severance package was less than what I would receive from the program and from my fears of losing my job without warning, like what colleagues at other agencies experienced.

I adored my coworkers, my daily tasks, and my agency, and I was planning a lifelong career with the federal government. With the removal of the values from the website, the restrictive hiring freeze, the constant bombardment saying we were not safe in our positions or that we needed to continue to prove ourselves, and the cancellation of many conferences and events I used to love, I felt as though I had to leave. I was chosen by the agency to attend a National New Leader Program that is no longer running, I always promoted the agency at events like the State Fair and I would take as many fire assignments as I was able so my decision to leave the agency that I gave so much to was not an easy one.

I am fortunate enough to have a new career and a new path, but it does make me sad to think about the life I anticipated and the path I intended. I am willing to share more if you need and I am grateful for the opportunity to share my story hopefully on a platform that can be recognized.

Erica, USDA-NASS DRP Participant, Story

The Deferred Retirement Program gave me something I hadn't had in years—time. Precious, irreplaceable time. And while I didn't choose the DRP freely, I've come to recognize what that time allowed me to do: I was able to help my ailing father in his time of need. I was there to take him to doctor's appointments, to sit with him, to simply be present. That alone made the transition worth something.

Still, I carry mixed feelings. I understand the importance of reducing the size of government, but I'm not sure this was the best way. I don't have a better solution, but I do know this: I loved my job with USDA-NASS. The people I worked with were smart, hardworking, and genuinely good. It was the perfect role for me, and I was good at it. I made meaningful connections, delivered results, and believed deeply in the mission.

What troubled me most was the lack of clarity around what would happen if we chose to stay. I was hired as a remote employee, with my office based in another state. I live in my forever home and had no intention of relocating. There were no viable office locations within a 75-mile radius. I wanted to finish my career here, and I could have—if the system had allowed it.

I'm a believer in remote work. It works well for me. It's not for everyone, and I understand that. But not everyone puts in the level of effort I did. Those who don't should return to an office. I shouldn't have had to. I was a great producer. I wish someone could see the recommendation letters I've received—they speak volumes about the kind of employee I was.

This story isn't just about policy. It's about people. It's about the lives we led, the choices we made, and the truths we carry forward. I hope mine adds something meaningful to the record.

Anonymous Story No. 2

I am a registered dietitian nutritionist and chef with over 15 years of experience working in Federal Child Nutrition Programs. I was raised in a farming family in the Western United States, and while I ultimately chose not to farm alongside my family, the values I grew up with have guided every step of my career. It has been my professional mission to support U.S. farmers and producers by ensuring their high-quality, American-grown foods are central to the meals served in federal nutrition programs that nourish our nation's most vulnerable.

Until recently, I proudly served the American public and American farmers as an employee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), where I worked to enhance the culinary culture and nutritional quality in Federal Child Nutrition Programs. From the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program to the Child and Adult Care Food Program, I was part of a team that made sure operators had the training, resources, and support they needed to serve healthy, compliant, and culturally relevant meals to millions of children and adults every day.

My work helped bridge the gap between America's farmers and America's future. I considered it an honor to translate policy into practical tools that improved meal quality, increased the use of American grown foods, and ultimately supported rural economies while promoting child health. I was deeply proud to work for USDA and had envisioned spending the remaining 20 years of my career in federal service.

But that vision was cut short.

On February 13, 2025, just three weeks before the end of my one-year new employee probationary period, I was illegally terminated, along with thousands of other federal employees, under the pretense of "performance concerns." In reality, we were victims of a mass firing that has since been ruled unlawful. We were issued identical form letters with no specificity, no recourse, and no warning. I spent six weeks navigating unemployment, seeking guidance from my union, and watching the fallout of this upheaval unfold in real time in the national news.

Eventually, a judge ruled that our terminations were indeed illegal, and I was reinstated with back pay. I returned to work with cautious optimism, but that optimism was quickly overshadowed. The next day, DOGE offered the Deferred Resignation Program 2.0. We were given one week to decide: stay and risk being targeted again or leave quietly under the conditions offered.

As a remote employee in a West Coast state, I saw no path forward that safeguarded my employment. The threats were not abstract. I had already been called “worthless” by certain elected officials. I had already experienced the trauma of being wrongly terminated. I had already watched many of my respected, long-tenured colleagues walk out the door. The environment had become one of fear, not service.

So, I took the Deferred Resignation Program, not because I wanted to leave federal service, but because I felt I had no choice.

To the Secretary of Agriculture, to members of Congress, to the American taxpayer, and to U.S. farmers: I write this not just for myself, but for all those who gave their careers to public service and were cast aside in an unprecedented purge. The loss of expertise, passion, and institutional knowledge in Federal Child Nutrition Programs is staggering. We are witnessing a devastating brain drain that may never be fully rebuilt. The damage extends far beyond individual careers. It affects the integrity, performance, and long-term sustainability of programs that nourish millions of children and support American agriculture.

This transition has not only wasted resources, but it has also wasted people. People like me, who believed in the mission, who served with dedication, and who brought decades of specialized knowledge to the table.

I miss the work. I miss my team. I miss serving this nation. And I mourn what we’ve lost.

America deserves better.

Samantha Trumbull's Story

As someone with a little less than 8 years of Federal service, and also someone under 40 (there are additional protections for folks over 40), I was feeling pretty vulnerable in my job. But, I had declined the first DPR and committed to staying for as long as possible. When the second DPR was offered our arms were twisted pretty hard by the Department. We got regular messages about how this opportunity would never come around again, and how RIFs would be coming before the end of the month. My office's leadership wasn't involved in any of the RIF plans (nor was any career person that I know of, and I asked our CHCO directly), but my understanding is that someone on the inside of the process confirmed that we were on the RIF list for the first round. We were told very clearly by HR and our leadership that the Secretary had decreed that there would be *no transfer opportunities*. Our leaders encouraged us to take whichever path (DPR, early retirement, RIF severance, etc.) was the most financially advantageous. I'm a disabled adult and so is my spouse, and we have two kids under 3. I carry our health insurance, not to mention our primary income. DPR gave me the longest off-ramp: 5 months, compared to 7-8 weeks. And friends I had all over the government who said: it's horrible here, you should take it.

Of course, half of the information we had at that time was a lie. My colleagues who stayed *were* reassigned within the Department. My office *wasn't* RIFed--instead the administration installed a sycophant political appointee to run it, despite a legal requirement that the office be headed by a *career* executive (though it WAS first on the RIF list when that list was finally released to the courts). I came back to the government from nonprofit leadership and expected to spend the rest of my career there--another 30-40 years. I am devastated to have lost that, but committed to being here when it's time to pick up the pieces of whatever's left after this administration ends.

And, I got to spend my oldest kid's last summer before starting school with him. We did two weeks of museum trips, bike rides, and adventures together--something I could not have done otherwise. Was the tradeoff worth it? I don't know. I still don't have paid work lined up--the competition here in the DC area is brutal. I can't move my family for a lot of reasons, but primarily because my family is here and they provide invaluable support to our kids.

SP's Story

I saw your LinkedIn post asking for those of us in USDA who took the DRP.

I did. I was also a probationary employee who was fired illegally on 2/14 and subsequently rehired. It was my dream and duty to serve the public and I did so as a loan specialist with Rural Development. I hoped to stay for the rest of my career. Instead, us probationary employees were strongly encouraged to take the DRP because during the anticipated RIF, we were the first to go. Personally, it was one of the hardest decisions I've ever made. Even further, I had to put my soul mate dog down unexpectedly the same damn day I signed the DRP paperwork. She passed from stomach cancer, and I still cry every day. I miss her like crazy.

I'm not sure I'll ever go back to Federal service. At the moment, I won't even consider it, but I may in the future. At the same time, I'm not sure I'll have the same opportunity to serve the public the way I had in Federal service. Although my time has come to an end (at least for the moment), I'm proud to have the opportunity.

Anonymous Story No. 3

One primary reason why many Federal employees who decided to take the DRP back in February and April were initially hired and accepted a full-time remote position as advertised on USA jobs. Then with the Return to Office Executive Order, for full-time remote employees, this executive order didn't quite cover or shall I say specify this particular area. Many full-time remote Federal employees didn't have an actual office to return to as their official duty station was their home residence. Shortly after the executive order was signed into action, these employees were then assigned to a new duty station which for many was at a random office within so many miles of where they actually lived. Several of these federal employees who were put in this position felt that being assigned to a random office would only be temporary until the reorganization efforts were finalized. It was anticipated based on the information provided to federal employees at that time, that these federal employees who were assigned to these random offices would then be asked to either work at one of the hub stations or be subject to a RIF. These full time remote federal employees saw no other option but to take the DRP route especially if they didn't live near one of the hub stations. It's important to note that federal employees are voters too just like private sector employees. Many people can't just relocate their lives for a job. They want to continue to grow professionally within their respective chosen career path and many times it becomes apparent that due to career limitations where they live, remote opportunities is another alternative to continue with their career growth and to offer their unique skillsets to employers. With this option taken away in the federal workforce, this has left not only many skilled and talented Federal workers with very limited if any opportunities available to them where they reside in the country, but it also makes it that much more difficult for the federal government to hire qualified applicants for certain positions.

Deb Hamilton's Story

I am writing to you as a dedicated public servant who has spent nearly a decade at the USDA, most recently with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) International Services. During my tenure, I witnessed firsthand the destructive impact of racially motivated bullying within the agency, a culture perpetuated and tolerated by those in leadership. Despite my commitment to the mission, I endured months of harassment and manipulation from my acting supervisor, which ultimately forced me to seek help from the USDA Anti-Harassment Office. My efforts to report these abuses to the highest levels—including the Office of the Administrator and Human Resources—revealed a deeply flawed system: the Office of Civil Rights is designed to deter formal complaints to protect the agency's reputation, while the Office for Anti-Harassment is overwhelmed and rarely able to substantiate claims due to an unreasonably high burden of proof placed on already vulnerable employees.

I joined government service after a long and successful private sector career, driven by a desire to contribute to the public good and learn from leading scientists and researchers. My early years at the USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service were positive and productive, but my recent experiences at APHIS have exposed systemic failures that jeopardize the well-being of civil servants and undermine the agency's integrity. I urge you, as members of Congress, to recognize the urgency of this situation and advocate for meaningful reforms that will protect Federal employees from harassment, ensure accountability at all levels, and restore trust in our public institutions. Please consider reducing or eliminating the Senior Executive Service program as it is clearly not developing leaders as Congress intended.

Anonymous Story No. 4

I was a USDA employee who took the DRP 2.0 in April after 31 years of federal service. I was eligible for VERA, though retirement had never crossed my mind. Like most employees sharing their stories, I loved my job.

During my 21 years with USDA (I spent 10 years prior with Defense agencies), I worked in a small regional office that felt like family. We were dedicated professionals who worked hard, cared deeply about each other, and took pride in supporting our programs and state partners. We celebrated together outside of work and supported each other through everything.

Everything changed on January 20. Our happy, supportive workplace became clouded with uncertainty and fear. Work ground to a halt—travel stopped, routine meetings with state partners became questionable, and funding delays left us with no answers for the agencies depending on us. Then came "Fork in the Road," followed by DRP 2.0.

The message became clear: our region would likely be eliminated, relocated, or significantly downsized. DOGE cancelled our office lease without telling us what would happen next. The constant threat of reorganization and vague messages kept me awake at night. My anxiety was overwhelming. HR couldn't answer questions about RIF or DRP procedures. Despite my 30+ years of service, I feared losing everything I'd worked for. So, I joined about 500 other employees—30 from my small regional office (outside the DC metro area) alone, nearly 30% of our staff—who left at the end of April.

I never felt at peace with my decision. The regret was almost immediate. I kept waiting to hear about the reorganization that would validate my choice, but it never came. I've heard vague plans about USDA hubs and restructuring, but I'm not even sure there is a real plan. It feels like a strategy to traumatize remaining employees into leaving voluntarily so the agency avoids RIF and severance costs.

There have been some bright spots, though they're overshadowed by missing my job and a dreadful job search. I've worked full-time since I was 15, never having a summer off. I'm a fitness enthusiast who loves dancing, and I've been able to take classes I'd never had time for before—I'm probably in better shape now than in my 20s and 30s. I've enjoyed taking my daughter to the bus stop without rushing, having time to prepare dinner, and helping with homework. I've had leisurely lunches with former coworkers. But the specter of unemployment hangs over everything. If I don't find work, I won't even be able to afford these classes.

Now that my retirement is official as of September 30, my anxiety has intensified. I've applied to over 100 jobs with only 5 interviews and no offers, customizing my resume for every single application. The silence and rejection is disheartening. The salaries for most jobs are often half my federal pay. I've cut to a bare-bones budget, hoping to hold onto my house. OPM warned us that first annuity payments could take six months or longer. I'm not yet eligible for the FERS supplement, and I can't move out of this school district with a middle schooler at home.

My formerly upbeat coworkers are now mostly depressed. We're moving forward with our lives, holiday celebrations, weddings, graduations, etc. but there's a cloud hanging low over everything. Before the 30th, I would ask my husband at least once a week about begging for my job back, though I knew it wasn't really an option. Of the former colleagues I've spoken with who took the DRP, none have found full-time work. A few are doing part-time consulting, but no one is making sufficient income.

We're all just trying to get through these times and hopefully come out okay on the other side. But, I know as former Federal employees, we are resilient. We've been dealing with attacks for years—threats to our benefits, being called lazy unelected bureaucrats whose jobs need to be eliminated, insufficient funding, endless continuing resolutions. I can't remember the last time we had a full year budget on October 1. Despite these attacks, we continued to do our jobs. I've seen people go above and beyond for years, putting in extra hours off the clock because they wanted the best for the American people, working with limited resources because we are resourceful and innovative.

I'm hopeful of finding a place where I'm appreciated and can continue to find similar fulfillment to my old job, add value to the community, and support my family until I can fully retire. I'm hopeful for myself and all my fellow federal employees, and ultimately for public service itself. The future of this country depends on a professional civil service.

Deanna Bakken's Story

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story.

My name is Deanna Bakken, and for nearly a decade I served in the United States Department of Agriculture in the Agricultural Marketing Service, within the Quality Assessment Division for red meat and Market Development Division with Research and Promotion. My work touched nearly every part of the supply chain, from live animals to retail counters, ensuring integrity and protecting consumers in the U.S. and around the globe.

I loved the purpose of my work, but I ultimately made the difficult and hasty decision to opt into the Deferred Resignation Program, merely days after surgery when I should have been recovering. I didn't leave because I wanted to. I left because the environment left me with no choice.

I experienced firsthand how leadership often failed to support employees in moments that should have reflected our shared values of service and humanity. When I stepped forward to donate a kidney, to literally give a piece of myself to save another life, I did not feel the backing or compassion from leadership that such a sacrifice should warrant. I was told my time off for recovery was an inconvenience, even after rescheduling surgery around my work schedule and was asked how badly does the recipient need a kidney. If you're not aware, they don't put people on the list for needing an organ for fun.

When I thought about pursuing higher education, working toward a doctorate to grow my capacity as a leader and professional, I encountered barriers instead of encouragement. These moments made it clear: the system did not value the whole person, only the output.

As someone passionate about organizational improvement, I regularly suggested ways to streamline processes, integrate automation, and introduce innovations that would save time, reduce errors and increase productivity. Those ideas were consistently shut down, not because they lacked merit, but because the culture was resistant to change. The message was clear: do the work the way it's always been done.

The DRP was framed to "trim the fat," to reduce inefficiency and remove those unwilling or unable to perform. In practice, it often had the opposite effect. Dedicated employees who cared deeply about our work, our teams, and the mission saw DRP as the only viable path to preserve our health and dignity. I left, not because I couldn't do the job, but because I wasn't supported in doing it well.

What's left behind are the very issues DRP was supposed to solve. Those who remain are carrying heavier workloads, picking up the slack for colleagues hoping their inability to

meet the job's demands will go unnoticed. Morale drops, burnout deepens, and the public service mission suffers.

Every time a committed employee walks out the door, the government loses institutional knowledge, trusted relationships, and capacity. The cost is felt not just internally, but across the agricultural sector, rural communities, and ultimately, the American people and international agricultural professionals we built relationships with.

Leaving USDA through DRP didn't end my desire to serve. Today, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, I continue to work with agricultural producers, workforce groups and rural leaders to strengthen teams and retain talent.

I gave a kidney, my evenings to higher education, and my career to public service. What I needed was support, but what I got was a system that pushed me out

Thank you for listening to my story, and for your commitment to creating a federal workforce worthy of the people it serves.

AW's Story

I took the DRP because I was told training was no longer of importance and our program office was being shut down.

It's been disheartening to learn that the new OA for FSIS wants to bring back training as he sees it as a vital need for supervisors and employees.

I believed in the mission and would return if I could.

RE's Story

I began working for the USDA in July 2005. I left in March 2015 for a year and seven months and returned in October 2016. In February of this year, I reached out to my HR specialist and asked her if I was eligible for the VERA. I was told that I was after July 25 of this year. I put in my paperwork to retire on July 26. Soon thereafter USDA offered DRP 2.0. I consulted with my HR specialist about my taking DRP 2.0 and retiring October 1 instead of July 26. I was told I could do that so I signed the DRP contract. On August 27 my HR specialist reached out to me and said they had made a mistake with my SCD date and I was not eligible for the VERA after all. I was so upset. Because of my age, I was also eligible for the Social Security supplement which meant I could get another job but I couldn't make more than 23,000 a year so I accepted a position on August 8 as an instructional assistant with an elementary school in Salem Virginia. I moved from the DC area to Salem on August 15. Prior to moving, I also purchased a new vehicle.

Upon hearing that they made this mistake, I explained to HR that this would not work for me and requested to resend my DRP and come back to active duty. They assured me they would get back to me. My agency said they wanted me back and would fight for me as well. On September 30, I was told they had received no answer from leadership about my returning and they were preparing for a shutdown. I had until October 3 to decide whether or not I wanted to take the MRA+10. Due to the timing of the shutdown, I was forced to take the MRA +10 which cut my annuity in half. I know I probably need to get a lawyer, but frankly, I can't afford one right now. I have no idea when my retirement paperwork will be processed, whether I will receive my last paycheck timely or whether my over 300 hours of an annual leave will be paid out to me timely as well. I feel so disgusted by the way this was rolled out. I walked away from a GS 13 step 6 and will be receiving an annuity of less than \$1400 a month. I am still employed through the school, but of course it will be impossible for me to live on a salary of less than \$3000 a month. There was no apology. There was no opportunity to request any type of compensation for this egregious error on their part. I am a really hard worker who loved my federal job. I came in as a single mother of three children with no degree who worked my way up from a GS 7 twice. I hope my story can help you in your compilation. As I understand it, I am not the only person this happened to.

Thank you for the opportunity to vent and to share.

Anonymous Story No. 5 submitted on Sept. 24

My DRP will be going into effect next week. Sadly, this does not seem real that I'm leaving the federal government.

I'm a boarded veterinary epidemiologist, who led the national wildlife disease program, and served as the incident commander for disease response for our country. I was placed on Schedule F in April and resigned due to this change. I simply don't feel I can do my job with the risk of being terminated with no reason and no protection.

To be clear. I loved my job! I believe it's incredibly important, and I am very good at it. I am 52 and intended to work another 10 years. To be forced out is simply unthinkable, yet here I am.

Adrienne Burch's Story

I was placed on paid administrative leave at 5 p.m. on Feb.13 due to my work in the Diversity and Inclusion space. In April 2025, those of us on admin leave were "voluntold" or heavily encouraged to take the DRP 2.0 being offered by USDA because our positions in the Civil Rights office were going to be subjected to the RIF. With only a week to decide, I opted to take the DRP 2.0 in conjunction with VERA due to my health issues and concerns about losing my health coverage. It was a difficult decision to make as I had finally achieved success in my career and reached the GS-13, step 4 level. I had no plans to retire this early. To add more insult to injury, I will not receive my full retirement benefit for another two years, because I am only 54 years old. So with a career that abruptly ended at almost 36 years of competitive service, I am now facing an oversaturated job market and, I suspect, some age discrimination. Now, I am relying on my faith to push me forward as I discover what my next chapter will be. I have started a business, and am actively looking for employment. I miss my federal career and coworkers every day. I am deeply disheartened, disappointed, and disgusted by what has been allowed to happen to us as a collective. I know that I am not alone when I say that I have given most of my adult life to the federal government, willingly. I created a life, learned invaluable skills, and met some of the most amazing people during the course of my work. I pray that we will all be restored and that my future holds even bigger rewards and success for me. As of Sept 7, 2025, I received a step increase, so I retired as a GS-13, step 5. It is bittersweet that I was removed from a job that I loved, that I was good at, and made a difference, and allowed me to make a great living. The chances of me landing a similar position in this current market are slim and will take some time. Knowing that we (those of us who took the DRP) cannot participate in any class action suits and have relinquished our rights to fight back legally is another consequence that these horrible beings have saddled us with. But guess what? I will continue to tell my story to anyone who wants to hear it because they will not silence me. They cannot stop me from speaking as a private member of the public. My career will not have ended in vain.

Haley Butler, PhD.'s Story

I completed my PhD in Entomology in October 2024 and was immediately hired on with ARS. Four months after my first day, I was terminated for my probationary status on 2/14/25 (It is important to mention that ALL newly hired research scientists have a mandatory 3-year probationary period). I was reinstated a week later due to stakeholder support of my position. While I was grateful for the support of our stakeholders, when the DRP 2.0 was offered, I took it. My decision to take the DRP was due to a variety of factors. A major factor was the Supreme Court's ruling that the administration's illegal terminations on Valentine's Day were, in fact, legal. The ruling, coupled with budget freezes, scientific censorship, and psychological torture from DOGE, all factored into my decision to leave. Within 6 months of being hired I had packed up my office twice.

I was ecstatic to start my job with USDA. I spent the last 10 years of my life dedicated to research, agricultural extension, and federal service. I interned with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for two summers as an undergraduate student, served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Paraguay from 2017-2019, then completed a PhD with the intention to join USDA or another federal agency after I graduated. Now I'm starting over. I'm heartbroken and angry, not just for myself but for all federal employees, research institutions, and science as a whole. The damage that has been done to our federal and scientific institutions in a single year is reprehensible.

Anonymous Story No. 6

I wanted to share my sentiments about accepting the DRP, how my life has been deeply affected, and my overall experience.

I was the first in my family to graduate from college, earning a B.A. and two Master's degrees. When I transitioned from my contractor role and finally landed a federal job, I felt incredibly proud of myself. I loved the agency I worked for, appreciated my colleagues, and felt deeply fulfilled in my role—working on forestry and climate change issues both internationally and domestically. It was exactly what I went to school for.

After years of hard work and accumulating significant student debt, I finally felt like I had found a long-term home. We're often told that federal employment provides stability—good pay, strong benefits, student loan forgiveness, and a secure career path. For the first time, I truly felt safe and settled.

I don't have the support of family—both my parents have passed—and I've always been very independent, with a few family members who depend on me. Being in my early 30s, I was finally establishing my career and was proud to be able to take care of myself.

I worked as a federal employee for just one year and assumed I'd weather the transition of a new administration. While I was told to expect changes, I never imagined losing my job would be one of them. The DRP helped me stay afloat for six months, but after submitting more than 150 applications and landing fewer than ten interviews, I'm growing increasingly anxious about what's next.

I'm actively applying everywhere, but maintaining the life I've built has been extremely hard. I have rent, a car note, and everyday bills, and accepting just any job would push me into poverty. Even after accepting the reality of a pay cut, finding stable work has proven incredibly difficult.

As painful as this experience has been, my heart goes out to every other federal worker who took the DRP, was laid off, or was unfairly dismissed. From probationary employees to those with over a decade of service, I hurt for them. Many have families, responsibilities, and lives outside of work—and losing their jobs because of shifting political goals has taken a devastating emotional and financial toll.

Reading others' stories on LinkedIn brings a bittersweet comfort—we all understand each other's pain. It's heartbreaking and unfair. If this is truly about “making America great again,” it cannot come at the cost of causing emotional, financial, and mental harm to those who dedicated their careers to serving the American people.

I believe this moment will pass, and that one day, our voices will not only be heard but respected. Though we've been made to feel invisible, I know our work and our worth still matter. I'm rooting for all of us as we continue to navigate these difficult days ahead—with hope and optimism that better times will come.

Jackie Adler's Story

My job as a federal employee working for the USDA—the dream job that I had been thinking about, applying, and waiting for—lasted exactly nine months. I started training on December 30, 2024 and my last day under the terms of the DRP was September 30, 2025. This was supposed to be my last stop, the place I would take all of my knowledge and experience and apply it to make a difference on a larger, more macro scale. I envisioned retiring from the USDA at some point in the far off future satisfied with a career of service and the impact that I had made. What transpired instead was nine months of excitement, disappointment, anxiety, dread, and heartbreak.

When I interviewed for my job at FNS in October 2024 and was subsequently hired, I thought I had “made it”. A friend who worked in state HR assured me that my job was relatively safe as there were union protections and guardrails to ensure that the agency I worked for wouldn't lose employees to political decisions. It took two months for the official hiring process to wrap up and I was additionally thrilled that I started before the end of the year, assuming that would also shore up my chances of maintaining my position no matter which way the wind blew.

I had only a brief few weeks of relative normalcy before things changed. I was just getting to know my team and learning - so excitedly - about what my job would look like before the shift came. All of the federal employees hired (at least in my office) in the past few years were hired as remote workers with the duty station their home address. I lived four hours from my office and would never have even considered it an option if I had to move in order to report in each day. The paperwork I signed to officially declare myself a remote worker with approval by my boss was never submitted. An order had already come down about ending remote work by the time my boss thought to put it through and he thought it best not to stir things up by drawing attention to any of his team. Three weeks in and I was already on pins and needles about what the future held.

That same week was the last in-person management review our team was allowed to do; we weren't even sure it would be a go, but they got it approved and off they went. I never had the chance to participate in that part of the experience as I was still new and in training; my job was to be ready to help from my desk at home with anything they needed. By the time of the next review in March all travel was impossible, making our reviews much more challenging.

Most of us weren't concerned when a list of all probationary employees was requested right after the inauguration; this is a fairly common policy when a new administration comes in. I let it roll off of me and kept going as though things hadn't changed.

It was January 28 when the first DRP offer came in. I never gave it a thought as this was that “dream job” I had waited so long to achieve. Stress was already high as we awaited the hiring of our Secretary and dealt with regular emails on a variety of topics including standardized signature blocks that also removed the use of pronouns, constant changes on whether or not we were expected to return to an office many of us lived nowhere near, and of course the infamous “5 things” weekly update expectation we were supposed to send.

On February 14, I had woken up to a phone call from a friend on another team who told me colleagues in other regions had received termination notices the night before when they logged in to their laptops that morning. I was temporarily relieved to find nothing when I too signed on. However, that relief was short-lived as mine came in only a couple of hours after the day began.

Our new Secretary was giving her speech and ironically assuring us in her welcoming letter that she committed to “improve federal dietary policy to align with science not politics” while at the same time illegally firing thousands of USDA employees.

The next few weeks were absolutely awful; knowing what had happened to us was illegal, answering emails from lawyers working with the union on our case, waiting for rulings to not only come down but be followed, and the unexpected end of pay with no idea if we would receive backpay at the end of it all. When the ruling finally did come down and they were forced to hire us back, we were paid and still not allowed to return to work. It was the week of March 24 before the USDA asked us to return.

I came back to what can only be described as a place filled with sadness and despondence. My formerly happy team was not only understaffed, but also beyond stressed from daily emails that were demoralizing and demeaning. They weren’t able to work as usual, with all travel arrangements for management evaluations canceled, a lack of direction on policy that prevented us from administering programs in a timely fashion, and an emphasis on micromanagement that resulted in delays on even the simplest things.

A second DRP offer came out on March 31, only days after I had returned to work. I assured my boss, my team, and myself that I wouldn’t take this one either. The very next day, offices in HHS in the building next to ours in Boston were shuttered and employees terminated without notice. I began thinking about my options, but couldn’t imagine walking away from the team or the work. It had taken so long to get here—was my dream going to end this quickly? One by one news came in of people in the office that were planning to take the new DRP offer. I still couldn’t force myself to sign, but the pressure was unrelenting with reminder emails coming in regularly.

Finally, on April 8—the last day possible to sign—I spent time on the phone going back and forth with a friend on another team. We each signed the DRP together that night just hours before the deadline, sitting on the phone and both of us crying as we made the choice.

It's been six months since I left my job at the USDA and I am still grieving for what I lost and also for what the government and the public lost. Most of my team also took the offer and a good chunk of my office as well. The sheer amount of experience that exited is indescribable. Our RA and my RD had a ridiculous number of years of service and the knowledge that left with them is irreplaceable. I cannot help but feel a deep sense of loss and the utter wrongness of what occurred. People with years of service that should have left with dignity, celebration, and gratitude from the federal government for their dedication instead just disappeared. No transfer of knowledge, no retirement parties, and no letters of recognition; only a sense of bewilderment and shock.

I don't regret my decision to accept that offer I was given almost exactly a year ago. The people I met, my ability to do the work of the people for even a short time, and the knowledge I gained along the way soothe some of the hurt I experienced. I hope someday federal employees are again appreciated, respected, and honored for their dedication and service even though I know I won't be one of them as my path most likely won't lead me back.

Anonymous Story No. 7

I once felt proud to work for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The mission, the people, and the direct connection to American farmers made it a deeply rewarding place to be. I valued the culture and believed in the work, regardless of whether Democrats or Republicans were in charge.

That culture has now changed dramatically under Secretary Rollins. Under her current leadership, a pervasive environment of fear and intimidation has taken hold, especially impacting employees with disabilities and those working in Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) roles as their jobs were to monitor and support those most vulnerable. Employees with disabilities, many of whom were hired for their specialized expertise and worked remotely (or with maximized telework) with great success, have been among the first targeted during recent organizational shifts. The official process for requesting a reasonable accommodation has effectively been stalled. HR personnel responsible for RA reviews have been directed not to process applications, and communication has slowed to a standstill in the first months of Secretary Rollins ruling. Supervisors seeking clarity or trying to help their employees were met with silence or even warnings that their own positions could be at risk if they approved any kind of telework or remote accommodations. This deliberate obstruction has left many disabled employees in untenable positions, forcing them to choose between their health and their livelihoods. The return-to-office mandate has been used as a pressure tool rather than an operational necessity. Even supervisors who once supported flexible work arrangements were and still are afraid to act, given the clear signals that approving accommodations could jeopardize their careers. The result is a workforce that feels demoralized and silenced. Many of the department's most skilled and dedicated employees have already left. Those who remain (mainly junior employees or those who have no other choice) describe a climate of fear where questioning directives or advocating for fairness feels dangerous. Industry partners have noticed the change as well, expressing concern over the agency's transparency and the quality of its public communication, but few feel safe to speak out. What was once a collaborative, data and mission-driven institution now is hollowed out. The commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion has been replaced with control, intimidation, and retaliation, particularly against those who most need protection. If the USDA can silence the very people responsible for ensuring fairness and equity, what message does that send to every federal employee and every American relying on this agency's integrity? This is not just a labor issue, it's a warning sign for the health of public service itself. Lawmakers and oversight bodies must act now to restore accountability before the culture of fear becomes the new normal.

Charles Melton's Story

Working for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) was always a dream of mine as my father and grandfather both spent their entire federal civil service careers with USDA. They were agricultural engineers, and I had a journalism degree, so I didn't think that dream would ever come true. Until it did in December 2024 when I not only got offered a position with USDA's Office of the Executive Secretariat, but I got a promotion as well.

When I started in January 2023, I quickly realized that I had found the perfect job to spend the remaining 12 years of my career doing as it was tailor-made for my skillset and provided the adrenaline rush that I missed from my newspaper days. I, not only, got to put my editing and writing skills to work every day, but I was afforded the opportunity to lead a culture change in an office that sorely needed it. Every time an opportunity arose to serve outside of my normal job duties, I jumped on it and became fully enmeshed in the USDA family. I loved every day of my job to the point of working extra hours, working at the gym, on airplanes, in Lyfts and Ubers, in hotels and even the Metro on my commute to the office and back.

Eight performance bonuses in two years should have been enough to make me feel safe when the administration occurred in January, but as soon as Secretary Rollins took command of USDA it quickly became obvious that she had no regard for or understanding of the importance of the Executive Secretariat. She took as much responsibility away from Exec Sec as she could as quickly as she could and completely disregarded and ignored the proper procedures and regulations for correspondence management. Instead of editing, the majority of my time was spent disseminating the constantly changing guidance provided by the Office of Congressional Relations regarding Secretarial correspondence. Initially I tried to embrace it and roll it, but as responses to congressional inquiries became nothing more than talking points from the White House instead of actual answers to the issues being raised by members of Congress, I could no longer stomach the ethical challenges presented by those responses. Responses were delayed because Secretary Rollins refused to allow Exec Sec to sign correspondence like her predecessors did and her Congressional Relations political appointees had no clue how to properly manage Secretarial correspondence.

I passed on the first DRP because as the first chairman of the Exec Sec's Employee Engagement Committee I felt an obligation to support my colleagues who chose to stick it out and do what I could to help them manage the increasing confusion and stress being generated by Secretary Rollins and her political appointees. I wasn't going to take the second DRP until the last of my Employee Engagement Committee members and my team leader took it because as long as one of them stayed I was going to stay with them until the

bitter end. My director was surprised when I walked into office on the Friday before the deadline for the second DRP and told her that I had chosen to take it. Everyone who I worked with in USDA was shocked as well, but I felt that I had two choices: take the DRP and hope for a soft landing in the private sector or get RIF'd as former Secretary Perdue eliminated Exec Sec during the first Trump administration. I chose the former because it allowed me to spend time with my mother before she passed in June that I wouldn't have had otherwise.

Now that I'm retired at 51 there's a lingering sense of loss and wondering about what could have been. To say that it was "voluntary" is a lie because Secretary Rollins put enough pressure on all USDA employees to take the DRP that it would turn a piece of coal into a diamond. Hopefully, the DRP will turn into a diamond for my fellow USDA DRPers, many of whom are scared to speak out for fear of retaliation. That fear has been expressed by more former USDA employees than I can count, and that's why I started this project. I wanted to give them a voice and take the heat round for them. I'm not afraid to stand up and speak out even if it comes at a great cost. Congress and the American people need to know the truth.

Postscript

First, let me note that each submission was lightly edited to maintain each person's unique voice in telling their story. Any style errors are mine and mine alone. I chose not to stick to GPO or AP style guidelines, because maintaining each person's voice was far more important to me than stringently adhering to a specific style guide or any style guide in general.

More than six months after many USDA employees took the Deferred Retirement Program, the emotional, psychological, and spiritual trauma still lingers. It's like a bad dream that many can't seem to wake up from no matter how hard they try, and each new day is another day spent trying to put the pieces of our lives back together. Yet no matter how hard they try, the pieces don't fit like they did when they were serving our nation with USDA in locations spread across the country. The close relationships we developed with their coworkers over the years remain but they're not what they once were as each of us is struggling to find new jobs and figuring out what our new normal is. Some have chosen to uproot and relocate to places where the cost of living is less than it is in places like the Washington, D.C. area; others have chosen to attempt to stick it out by taking whatever part-time jobs they can find to supplement their retirement pay with hopes of eventually finding something full-time.

To a degree each of them feels a sense of anger and bitterness towards the current administration and Secretary Rollins in particular, because she effectively forced each of them into making a decision that none wanted to make. Instead of being given the information we needed to make an informed decision about our futures, they were met with silence when they asked questions and bombarded with emails encouraging us to take the DRP. As you read in the preceding pages, some would have made a different decision had they known what happened to their agencies and offices after the second DRP period ended. Adequately replacing those who would have stayed could easily prove a monumental task given the way the DRP was handled and the upcoming USDA reorganization. It's likely that some of those who would have chosen not to take the DRP would have left due to the reorganization, but that's pure speculation at this point. The hope is that all those who took the DRP eventually find positions that place them back in the workforce and continue contributing to the betterment of our nation in some meaningful way.

At the end of the day each USDA employee who took the DRP deserved much better than they received from Secretary Rollins and the current administration. Hopefully, when historians look back on this tumultuous period in USDA's history, they will present a clear and honest picture of what happened without any bias or political spin. One thing is certain

not one retirement certificate or letter of appreciation will hang on the walls of all those who retired under the DRP. Just like in their lives there will forever be a hole on their office or home walls where that should be. If offered a retirement certificate or letter of appreciation from Secretary Rollins, I doubt many, if any, would accept it, because it would only serve as a visible reminder of a period of their lives that most would just as soon forget. However, through this anthology, hopefully, their stories won't be forgotten or lost to history.