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February 4, 2025

The Honorable John Thune  
Majority Leader  
511 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer  
Democratic Leader  
322 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

## **VOTE NO on the Confirmation of Brooke Rollins as Secretary of the Department of Agriculture**

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the Southern Poverty Law Center (“SPLC”), we write to oppose the confirmation of Brooke Rollins to serve as Secretary of the Department of Agriculture (USDA). USDA plays a crucial role in shaping policies that not only address the needs of Americans but also impact global food systems. From supporting farmers and ranchers who feed our nation to administering SNAP benefits that help millions of families avoid hunger and food insecurity, USDA’s work is more vital than ever, especially as food costs continue to rise. In such challenging times, the USDA requires strong and capable leadership—unfortunately, a thorough review of Brooke Rollins’ record shows that she is not equipped to provide it. Although she has childhood experiences engaged in farming and obtained a degree in agricultural development three decades ago, she has had no more recent involvement and no professional experience at all in agriculture or food policy.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Ms. Rollins’ associations with extremist organizations and ideologies and her harmful hardline positions on basic issues of civil rights and racial equity – such as her organization’s work to restrict voting rights and dismissive remarks about diversity, equity and inclusion – make her unfit to lead USDA.

SPLC was founded in Alabama in 1971 with the mission of making the promise of the Civil Rights Movement a reality for all. We achieve this through litigation, advocacy, and public education, working to reduce poverty and ensure equal access to opportunities for all, especially for Black and Brown communities that have been historically and systematically denied them. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has lifted millions of households out of poverty.<sup>2</sup> More than 6.3 million people receive SNAP benefits in SPLC’s five focus states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi).<sup>3</sup> Additionally, historical and ongoing discrimination against Black farmers has contributed to significant disparities in land ownership, access to resources, and opportunities for growth within the

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<sup>1</sup> America First Nomination: Brooke Rollins, America First Policy Institute, January 15, 2025, <https://americafirstpolicy.com/issues/america-first-nomination-brooke-rollins>.

<sup>2</sup> Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, “Economic Security Programs Reduce Overall Poverty, Racial and Ethnic Inequities,” July 1, 2021, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/more-than-4-in-10-children-in-renter-households-face-food-andor>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, *SNAP Community Characteristics*, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/snap/community-characteristics>.

agricultural sector.<sup>4</sup> These disparities are not the result of any lack of ability among Black farmers but rather stem from government decisions about who receives resources.<sup>5</sup> The USDA's role is crucial in helping to either address or exacerbate these issues and more.

The work of the Secretary of Agriculture is not a small undertaking. President Lincoln, who signed the legislation to establish the USDA, once referred to it as "The People's Department." Lincoln recognized that the USDA's work impacts every American, in every community and zip code across the country. The Secretary oversees 29 agencies and nearly 100,000 employees, serving more than 4,500 locations nationwide.<sup>6</sup> Given the enormity of these duties, the SPLC sent you a letter on January 10, urging you to confirm qualified and capable leaders to fulfill the responsibilities of Cabinet-level positions and who serve the best interests of the American people.<sup>7</sup> The person leading the USDA must be dedicated to fostering innovation in agriculture, protecting the environment, and ensuring equitable access to food and resources for all. In our assessment, Ms. Rollins falls short of these standards.

### **Ms. Rollins Lacks the Experience Needed to Serve as Secretary of Agriculture**

President Trump and Ms. Rollins tout her farm upbringing, childhood participation in Future Farmers of America, and a bachelor's degree in agricultural development earned over 30 years ago. However, this glosses over the obvious: Ms. Rollins has no professional experience in agriculture or food policy. While she has held several roles – including policy director for the Governor of Texas, leading think tanks, and working in the first Trump Administration—she has never held a position focused on agriculture.<sup>8</sup>

Ms. Rollins has demonstrated no interest or focus on agriculture throughout her career. The Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF), which she led from 2013-2018, does not list agriculture as one of its 19 issue areas.<sup>9</sup> Ms. Rollins also led the America First Policy Institute (AFPI), a right-wing think tank established in anticipation of a second Trump term<sup>10</sup> has been described as the 'White House in waiting.'<sup>11</sup> AFPI's mission is purportedly to 'advance policies that put the American people first,' yet in her four years at the helm,<sup>12</sup> Ms. Rollins never prioritized agriculture or the USDA's work. She hired no staff to focus on the issue, and of the 80+ op-eds, statements, and commentaries listed as 'Written by Brooke' on AFPI's website, not even one addressed agriculture.<sup>13</sup>

Given this dearth of experience in the work of the USDA, Ms. Rollins is simply not equipped to lead the USDA in its vital work supporting agriculture, protecting the safety of our food supply, and combatting food insecurity among vulnerable people and communities. One very salient example of Ms. Rollins' lack of preparedness for this role came during her confirmation hearing, when she was asked about her approach to the bird flu epidemic that is currently raging through U.S. poultry and cattle farms and that

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<sup>4</sup> Summer Sewell, *There Were Nearly A Million Black Farmers in 1920. Why Have They Disappeared*, The Guardian, April 29, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/29/why-have-americas-black-farmers-disappeared>

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Our Agency," accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/general-information/our-agency#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20Department%20of%20Agriculture,across%20the%20country%20and%20abroad>

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Margaret Huang and LaShawn Warren, January 10, 2025, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/policies/letter-to-senators-urging-careful-evaluation-of-president-elect-trumps-administrative-nominees/>

<sup>8</sup> America First Nomination, *supra*, note 1.

<sup>9</sup> Texas Public Policy Foundation, "Issues Page," accessed on January 25, 2025, <https://www.texaspolicy.com/issues/>

<sup>10</sup> Michelle L. Price and Colleen Long, *What to Know About Pam Bondi, Trump's New Pick for Attorney General*, Associated Press, November 25, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/things-to-know-pam-bondieec1d16075c7debd62223b475e3977d>.

<sup>11</sup> Hailey Fuchs, *et al*, *Meet the Think Tank Planning A Second Trump Administration*, Politico, August 29, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/08/29/trump-transition-plan-afpi-00176674>

<sup>12</sup> America First Policy Institute, "Our Mission," <https://americafirstpolicy.com/about>.

<sup>13</sup> America First Policy Institute, "Written By Brooke," accessed January 25, 2025, <https://americafirstpolicy.com/team/brookerollins>

may also threaten to trigger another human pandemic. Her only response was “there is a lot I have to learn on this.”<sup>14</sup> We must have a Secretary at the USDA who is not starting from scratch but has already learned a great deal about its work. Unfortunately, Ms. Rollins appears to have been chosen for her loyalty to President Trump, not for her qualifications. While her confirmation may serve President Trump’s interests, her appalling lack of experience makes it abundantly clear that it will not serve the American people’s interests.

### **Ms. Rollins is Not Committed to USDA’s Vital Role in Ensuring Food Security for Low-Income Americans**

The USDA’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a vital lifeline for millions of low-income children and families.<sup>15</sup> Yet, despite its importance, there have been persistent efforts—both past and present—to significantly cut the program.<sup>16</sup> At her confirmation hearing, Ms. Rollins declined to affirm her support for SNAP when asked whether she would oppose cuts.<sup>17</sup> Even more concerning, AFPI—led by Rollins—has consistently backed cuts to SNAP, and published an op-ed calling the 2021 benefit increase a step toward “a more permanent cradle-to-grave welfare state” and claiming it would “incentivize people to remain unemployed.”<sup>18</sup> If Ms. Rollins is at all familiar with this vital aspect of the position she hopes to fill, she should know that SNAP has work requirements,<sup>19</sup> and that most SNAP recipients who are able to work do so.<sup>20</sup> Fortunately, Congress has not followed AFPI’s advice.<sup>21</sup> Those increased benefits to SNAP lifted over 2.4 million people out of poverty, including 1 million children.<sup>22</sup> The USDA plays a vital role in ensuring that no American—no child—goes hungry. Unfortunately, Ms. Rollins’s statement offers no assurance that she would protect or expand vital programs like SNAP. Many of the proposals to cut spending on SNAP would render hundreds of thousands – and in some cases millions – of low-income people ineligible to continue receiving benefits.<sup>23</sup> The harms of these proposals would also not be evenly distributed. They would hit rural communities hardest, where the largest share of SNAP benefits is distributed,<sup>24</sup> and the South, which has some of the nation’s highest food insufficiency rates.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Transcript of Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee Hearing on Nomination of Brooke Rollins, January 23, 2025, at 19.

<sup>15</sup> In 2024, SNAP helped about 41 million people afford the food they needed each month. Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, *Policy Basics: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)*, November 25, 2024, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

<sup>16</sup> Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, *House Committee Farm Bill’s 30 Billion SNAP Cut, Other Harmful Proposals Outweigh Improvements*, August 8, 2024, [House Committee Farm Bill’s \\$30 Billion SNAP Cut, Other Harmful Proposals Outweigh Improvements](https://www.cbpp.org/house-committee-farm-bill-30-billion-snap-cut-other-harmful-proposals-outweigh-improvements) | Center on Budget and Policy Priorities;

<sup>17</sup> Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry, *Confirmation Hearing for Brooke Rollins, of Texas, to be Secretary of Agriculture*, January 23, 2025, <https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/hearings/nomination-hearing-01-23-2025>

<sup>18</sup> Cale Clingenpeel, *President Biden’s War Against Work*, America First Policy Institute, September 9, 2021, <https://americafirstpolicy.com/issues/op-ed-president-bidens-war-against-work>

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, *SNAP Work Requirements*, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/work-requirements>.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Llobrera and Lauren Hill, *SNAP Helps Millions of Workers in Low-Paying Jobs*, Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, July 30, 2024, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-helps-millions-of-workers-in-low-paying-jobs#:~:text=More%20than%20two%2Dthirds%20of,who%20can%20work%20do%20so..>

<sup>21</sup> Kyle Ross, *How the Trump Administration Could Leave Families Hungry: Potential Cuts to SNAP in 2025 and Beyond*, Center for American Progress, February 3, 2025, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/how-the-trump-administration-could-leave-families-hungry-potential-cuts-to-snap-in-2025-and-beyond/>.

<sup>22</sup> Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, *USDA Announces Important SNAP Benefit Modernization*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/usda-announces-important-snap-benefit-modernization>

<sup>23</sup> *How the Trump Administration Could Leave Families Hungry*, *supra*, note 21.

<sup>24</sup> *Rural Hunger in America: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*, Food Research & Action Center, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/rural-hunger-in-america-snap-get-the-facts.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Chris Gilligan, *States With the Highest Rates of Food Scarcity*, U.S. News & World Report, August 7, 2023, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/states-with-the-highest-food-insufficiency-rates>.

## **Ms. Rollins' Record Shows That She Will Not Support or Pursue Equitable Use of USDA Resources**

Equally troubling is Ms. Rollins's record of opposing racial equity. During her hearing, she reminded Senators that President Trump won on the “concept of removing diversity, equity, and inclusion.”<sup>26</sup> When asked if she would commit to hiring a diverse workforce, she avoided a clear answer.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, when asked whether she would continue the work of USDA’s Equity Commission—a body established to address documented historical discrimination and eliminate discriminatory barriers to access—Ms. Rollins was noncommittal.<sup>28</sup> Sadly, her statements and evasiveness align with troubling patterns. Under Ms. Rollins’ leadership, AFPI has supported discriminatory restrictions on voting rights.<sup>29</sup> She also served on the 1776 Commission, which promoted education that glossed over historical truths, such as downplaying the realities of slavery.<sup>30</sup> She echoed the claim that Vice President Kamala Harris was a “DEI hire,” despite Ms. Rollins herself only having a sliver of Harris's experience.<sup>31</sup> She also stated that “discussion of systemic racism... divides our nation and creates an inherent distrust in our Founders.”<sup>32</sup> It is clear that Ms. Rollins has no interest in serving all Americans, let alone ensuring equitable access to USDA resources.

Ms. Rollins’ attitudes on issues of race and civil rights must disqualify her from taking the helm of an agency that has such profound impacts on the lives of Black and brown people. In addition to programs such as SNAP, that serve low-income people, USDA still has much work to do to address its own historic discrimination against Black farmers. Over the last century, Black farmers have lost 16 million acres of farmland worth up to \$350 billion – 90% of what they once owned – compared with just 2% for white farmers.<sup>33</sup> Much of that loss was owing to the policies and practices of the USDA, which provided huge amounts of funding through loan and subsidy programs primarily to white farmers while systematically and deliberately withholding it from Black farmers.<sup>34</sup> While this legacy of discrimination has been acknowledged by the US Civil Rights Commission since 1965,<sup>35</sup> USDA only recently began to take measures – vehemently fought against by white nationalist groups – to redress it.<sup>36</sup>

The work of USDA has a profound impact on the lives of millions of Black and brown people, and their communities, in our country. It must not be led by a person whose disdain for their lives and concerns.]

## **Ms. Rollins Has Expressed Extremist Views and Associated with Far-Right Extremists**

During Ms. Rollins’ tenure as president of the American First Policy Institute (AFPI), the organization partnered with the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), which has been designated as a

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<sup>26</sup> Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry, *Confirmation Hearing for Brooke Rollins, of Texas, to be Secretary of Agriculture*, January 23, 2025, <https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/hearings/nomination-hearing-01-23-2025>

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* Notably, The Equity Commission’s Final Report, which includes recommendations for actions USDA could take, has been removed from the Department’s website, See <https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/general-information/priorities/equity-usda>

<sup>29</sup> Robert Hogan, *Pam Bondi’s Recent History Is Troubling for the DOJ*, Brennan Center for Justice, December 26, 2024, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/pam-bondis-recent-history-troubling-doj>.

<sup>30</sup> President’s Advisory 1776 Commission, “The 1776 Report,” January 2021, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Presidents-Advisory-1776-Commission-Final-Report.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Brooke Rollins [@BrookeLRollins], X, October 16, 2023, 12:40 p.m., <https://x.com/BrookeLRollins/status/1826817878643147142>

<sup>32</sup> Brooke Rollins, “Center for 1776: Fighting for Pro- America, America,” June 28, 2021,

<https://americafirstpolicy.com/issues/center-for-1776-fighting-for-a-pro-america-america>

<sup>33</sup> *Fighting to Grow: Black farmers continue to battle systemic discrimination*, Southern Poverty Law Center, 18 February 2022.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*

<sup>35</sup> Southland Community Trust, *Acknowledging a history of discrimination at the USDA*, September 20, 2024, <https://www.southsideclt.org/acknowledging-a-history-of-discrimination-at-the-usda/>; *Fighting to Grow*, *supra*, note 20.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*

hate group by SPLC's Intelligence Project.<sup>37</sup> FAIR's founder John Tanton, once wrote, "As Whites see their power and control over their lives declining, will they simply go quietly into the night? Or will there be an explosion?"<sup>38</sup> Additionally, while serving as president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF), Ms. Rollins worked closely with Texas billionaire Tim Dunn, who, according to *Texas Monthly*, is a "key player in the growing Christian nationalist movement" and believes the U.S. is "in the midst of a holy battle that pits Christians against those he refers to as Marxists."<sup>39</sup> Rather than distancing herself from Mr. Dunn, Ms. Rollins brought him onto the board of AFPI when she left TPPF.<sup>40</sup>

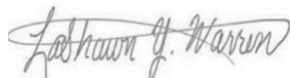
Ms. Rollins's ties to extremists go beyond affiliations; she has openly endorsed their views. In a 2023 op-ed, she claimed that the "ethos" of the left is "violence."<sup>41</sup> She has subscribed to conspiracy theories about a "deep state" and tweeted that there are "only two sides in American politics now – the side that is trying to Make America Great Again, and the side trying to kill its opponent."<sup>42</sup> Such statements should not only disqualify her from serving as Secretary of the USDA, but also from holding any position in government.

### **Conclusion**

At her confirmation hearing, Ms. Rollins casually remarked, "I work for him [President Trump]."<sup>43</sup> The fact that she made this statement before even being confirmed is both shocking and revealing. The Secretary of the USDA does not take an oath to serve any individual; they serve the American people. Ms. Rollins's record makes it abundantly clear she is incapable of fulfilling that responsibility. She is grossly underqualified, and her refusal to address racial equity or oppose cuts that will worsen hunger underscores her inability to serve the American people. Moreover, her associations with extremists and her own views demonstrate she lacks the character to do so.

For these reasons, we respectfully request that you vote "NO" on Brooke Rollins to serve as Secretary of Agriculture.

Best regards,



LaShawn Warren  
Chief Policy Officer



Sakira Cook  
Federal Policy Director

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<sup>37</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, *SPLC Designated Hate Group: Federation for American Immigration*, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/extremist-files/federation-american-immigration-reform/>

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

<sup>39</sup> Russell Gold, *The Billionaire Bully Who Wants to Turn Texas into a Christian Theocracy*, *Texas Monthly*, March 2024, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/billionaire-tim-dunn-runs-texas/>

<sup>40</sup> Ava Kofman, *A Pair of Billionaire Preachers Built the Most Powerful Political Machine in Texas. That's Just the Start.*, *Pro Publica*, October 2, 2024, <https://www.propublica.org/article/tim-dunn-farris-wilks-texas-christian-nationalism-dominionism-elections-voting>.

<sup>41</sup> Brooke Rollins, *Never Forget What the Left Is Capable Of*, *Daily Caller*, August 3, 2023, <https://dailycaller.com/2023/08/03/opinion-never-forget-what-the-left-is-capable-of-brooke-rollins/>

<sup>42</sup> Brooke Rollins [@BrookeLRollins], X, October 27, 2023, 3:18 p.m., <https://x.com/BrookeLRollins/status/1855761103139098760> ; Brooke Rollins [@BrookeLRollings], X, September 22, 2023, 7:25 p.m., <https://x.com/BrookeLRollins/status/1812256498359087176>

<sup>43</sup> Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry, *Confirmation Hearing for Brooke Rollins, of Texas, to be Secretary of Agriculture*, January 23, 2025, <https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/hearings/nomination-hearing-01-23-2025>