

Farmers Are Turning on MAHA

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Mark Felix for The New York Times

By Eoin Higgins

Mr. Higgins is a journalist based in New England.

The livelihoods of American small farmers are based on precariously thin profit margins. During the 2024 election, this group of Americans gravitated further toward President Trump’s promises to improve wages and lower inflation. Farmers’ support for Mr. Trump also swelled thanks to endorsements from Robert F. Kennedy Jr., whose Make America Healthy Again messaging around combating chronic disease and [improving diet and nutrition](#) has resonated strongly with many Americans. Those in the agricultural and food sectors interested in making fresh, healthier foods more accessible to the public believed Mr. Kennedy’s elevation as secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services would lead to policies that supported their work.

Instead Mr. Kennedy has cast doubt, fairly or not, on the utility of established industrial farming practices, such as pesticide use. He has stood by as programs beneficial to American farmers have been cut. And the health secretary's policies are not based in sound, established science; the fact that his department's Make America Healthy Again Commission report, released in May, had several [false and misleading citations](#) has shaken some supporters' confidence in him.

As someone who lives in a rural part of the country among many who share the goals of the MAHA movement, I'm keenly aware of the frustration some in the agricultural community are feeling. I talked to many farmers over the past three months, and they all found Mr. Kennedy's hypocrisy troubling. His unwillingness to stand up to policies within his own administration that undermine American farmers suggests, to them, that he is either too meek to push back or disingenuous about his commitment to his goals. Either way, Mr. Kennedy's response to farmers thus far indicates his MAHA agenda isn't really about meaningful impact; it's a rallying cry aimed at keeping himself in power.

Mr. Kennedy "owes a lot to the president and the administration for even putting him into this role to begin with," said Will Westmoreland, a farmer from Polk County, Mo., who also runs a Democratic Party-aligned political strategy firm. "And I think that causes him not to speak out because he doesn't want to rock the boat." Mr. Westmoreland's critiques of Mr. Kennedy are not solely about politics — he's not opposed to the secretary's general stance on healthy food, but feels that "there are a lot more effective voices out there for better agriculture, better food and better policies for rural America than him."

Nutrition is a core component of Mr. Kennedy's and the administration's [stated goals](#). Under Mr. Kennedy's leadership, the Food and Drug Administration and the National Institutes of Health are beginning research to [determine the harm](#) of ultraprocessed foods and food additives. An executive order signed in February instructed federal agencies to work "with farmers to ensure that United States food is the healthiest, most abundant and most affordable in the world." In May, Mr. Kennedy [declared](#), "We cannot make America healthy again without the partnership with the American farmers."

But when it comes to the nuts and bolts of what actually gets enacted, the administration's actions in the ensuing months have only made life harder for farmers like the ones I spoke to.

Look no further than the [cancellation](#) in March of the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement and Local Food for Schools federal programs. Those cuts saved the government about \$1 billion but came at the expense of providing schools, child care centers and food banks with fresh food from local farmers. Access to these foods would presumably be part of the solution for reducing diet-related chronic diseases,

which MAHA contends are on the rise in underserved communities. The administration killed the program anyway.

Mr. Kennedy's silence on such moves — the cuts, for instance, went unmentioned during a joint [appearance with](#) the agriculture secretary, Brooke Rollins, on Fox Business in July to promote the removal of food dyes and an “unprecedented” partnership between the two agencies they lead — has frustrated many farmers across the country. “Maybe he has some grand plan that he really feels like he’s making progress with, but I haven’t seen that be able to happen with any cabinet in the last Trump administration or this one,” said Hannah Smith-Brubaker, a farmer and executive director of the farming nonprofit Pasa Sustainable Agriculture in Pennsylvania.

Many farmers are also alarmed by the anti-science rhetoric coming from Mr. Kennedy and the MAHA movement, especially when it comes to the [spraying of pesticide on crops](#). Michelle Miller, a former farmer who educates consumers about modern farming practices and policies under the name Farm Babe, told me that the situation is complicated; some farmers spray often, some only at the beginning of the season and some not at all. But Mr. Kennedy's rhetoric around pesticide use in farming is also rubbing people the wrong way and, to some, suggests a deeper ignorance in how food production really works. Ms. Miller told me she does not consider herself a partisan actor, but worries the secretary and his allies are showing real hostility to farmers who use pesticides and herbicides.

“If we want to make America healthy again, can we please start with America and the people that are already doing that?” Ms. Miller said. “Can we stop throwing mud at the very people that are breaking their backs to feed us? And can we let them do their jobs and can we listen to them?”

The Illinois farmer Dan Kelley is equally unimpressed. By ignoring the fact that [the F.D.A.](#) and the [Agriculture Department](#) have already conducted rigorous, yearslong investigations into the effects of pesticide spray practices, Mr. Kennedy is ignoring reality, he said.

“The agriculture community by and large supported President Trump,” Mr. Kelley told me. “We’re of a like mind in many ways. But this lack of sound, science-based research is concerning.”

Farmers will continue to farm with or without federal support, but the people who will be most harmed by Mr. Kennedy's policies are those the MAHA movement is supposed to help by providing access to fresh, healthy food. Solutions that prioritize working with local producers and community funding are going to have more positive effects on health and nutrition, at least in the short term. Until the federal government reprioritizes the role of farmers in nutrition, they're on their own.

More on the farming industry



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“Democrats Can Finally Stop Pandering to Farmers” is especially good and apropos. The inevitable collision between Mr. Kennedy’s crusade against environmental toxins causing things like autism, cancer—and God knows what else—and industrial farming practices could be seen from the beginning. The coming 2026 judgment about glyphosates (Roundup) will be an interesting test of his “integrity.” We will also see if the President who likes to chow down bushels of Big Macs will cut Kennedy loose like he did Elon Musk. Maybe Kennedy will be content with having gutted public health agencies and the vaccines industry. Bobby Kennedy’s son!

No one would listen to me here on the Prairies, but there is a similar problem with agriculture here. Small farmers struggle and medium-size farmers fall by the wayside every year. The takeover by Big Farmers creeps closer every year to total domination. Big farmers, and resource extraction industries like potash and oil and gas, own the Saskatchewan Party, and have set up tax and royalty systems increasingly in their favour. Yet there are many disgruntled people in rural Saskatchewan, and none of these big players are liked. Big farmers now may be smooth and polished political charmers as best they can be—because you might be connected to land they want to buy or someone useful to them as seasonal labor—but few people are fooled. Politically, opposition parties, i.e., the NDP, need to target the disaffected by calling into scrutiny the big corporate farmers (and resource companies) who are not sustaining health care and public services like they could and should be. There are fewer of them as a voting bloc every year. Go after them! They, and the resource extraction industries can huff and puff and snort all they want, threatening to “withhold investment”, but where are they going to go? TJB