

Big Meat's ties to USDA top official revealed

BY ND NEWS
COOPERATIVE

This article was written by Grey Moran and originally published by our Rural News Network partner, Sentient.

Just before her appointment to the Trump administration, Mindy Brashears held too many professional roles to enumerate. It was getting to be a bit much, even for her, she admitted. "I have many titles. I keep saying I need to get rid of some of these and they just keep adding on," she said on a podcast. Her primary job was as a professor and director of the International Center for Food Industry Excellence at Texas Tech University. But she also held a wide range of advisory and consultant positions across the meat industry — the very industry she is now tasked with regulating at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Brashears now serves as the USDA's Under Secretary for Food Safety, the highest-ranking food safety official in the United States government. One of her key responsibilities is leading the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), the agency that oversees the safety of the nation's meat and poultry supply.

Financial disclosure records indicate that in 2025, Brashears owned up to \$1 million in shares of Bottomland Prime, a Texas beef processor. She also served on advisory boards for the Meat Institute's Protein PACT, Boar's Head, Claxton Poultry Farms and the International Stockmen's Education Foundation, while providing consulting services to Chiefline Red Angus and Nebraska Beef — to name just a few of her overlapping meat industry ties.

The full scope of Brashears's meat industry affiliations is revealed in financial disclosure records, part of a larger trove of nearly 3,200 ethics documents related to Trump and his appointed officials released by the nonprofit investigative newsroom ProPublica. These records are now housed in a searchable database, enabling other journalists and members of the public to review potential conflicts of interest within the Trump administration.

These disclosures are typically the first step for a political appointee in addressing potential conflicts of interest ahead of their new role. "When a person is nominated to become a political appointee, the ethics officials at that agency work with the ethics officials at the Office of Government Ethics to review all of the financial assets and liabilities and income that

are listed in the financial disclosure," Kedric Payne, a lawyer who leads the ethics program at the Campaign Legal Center, tells Sentient.

Following the review, an agreement is created between an ethics official and the new appointee, outlining agreed-upon steps the appointee will take to mitigate disclosed conflicts of interest within typically 90 days. Once completed, a certificate of compliance is filed confirming that these steps have been taken.

"Before this administration, people would always follow through with it," says Payne, referring to these agreements. But now, there are "situations where the political appointee files the certificate of compliance, but it indicates that they didn't comply. We've seen that with high-level officials, including Secretary Bessent of the Treasury," who did not divest from assets as promised.

In her ethics agreement, Brashears pledged to resign from her advisory positions, including at the Meat Institute, an industry group whose members include Tyson, JBS, Cargill Meat Solutions and Smithfield. However, her compliance certificate shows she received authorization to participate in an event with the Meat Institute on January 12th, 2026, just two days before her appointment.

She participated in part of the Meat Institute's board session, where she previously served as a member, in a fireside chat with former Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue, according to a USDA constituent update. While it is not an apparent ethics violation, and Brashears followed the appropriate procedure for seeking ethics advice, it does show her close relationship with the institute.

Brashears' meat industry entanglements likely come as little surprise to anyone who has followed her career. While serving in the same role at the USDA during the first Trump administration, a 2022 congressional report dubbed her "the industry's go-to fixer in blocking attempts by other regulators to improve health and safety conditions in meatpacking plants," particularly referring to her close work with the meat industry during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2022 report relies on subpoenaed meat industry emails that show Brashears was viewed as able to carry out the industry's bidding. "So far, we've been able to handle these situations, but at some

point we may need to get Mindy [Brashears] involved if we are forced to shut down a plant," wrote Tyson's vice president of federal government relations, Charles Penry, in a March 2020 email to the Meat Institute's president and CEO, Julie Anna Potts.

The same report found "internal meatpacking industry emails show Brashears personally calling and texting with industry representatives, giving them her personal cell phone number, and using her personal email to communicate with them" — likely, as a way to avoid leaving a paper trail that could be traced through public records requests.

Yet despite her reputation as the "go-to fixer" for the meat industry in the halls of the USDA, she has been appointed again. And she is not the only USDA appointee whose affiliations raise questions.

As Sentient reported, Justin Ransom, a former Tyson executive who helped launch the company's controversial "climate-friendly" beef label, now serves as the administrator of FSIS. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins also co-founded the America First Policy Institute (AFPI), a conservative think tank that has been influential across the government. Perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise then that in January, Rollins announced the USDA appointments of Doug Hoelscher and Tate Bennett, who both previously held roles at AFPI.

It's not an ethics violation for a government official to have prior industry experience, yet Payne emphasizes the importance of a meaningful level of due diligence to ensure that decisions are made in the public interest.

"Yes, you're supposed to come into government with some expertise that might be from the private sector, and we shouldn't bar people from having this experience and ties to the industry," said Payne. "But when you come into government service, you have to be extra cautious as a public official to avoid assisting your former organizations."

As ethics officials are being pushed out of office, this level of caution and ethical integrity appears to be in jeopardy. Even when not an ethical violation, appointees are finding more "clever ways of trying to get a way around conflicts of interest," says Payne. "It doesn't seem to be a culture of compliance."

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If you contributed to the Water Cents program and do not want your contributions used for these intended and expanded purposes, the district is offering a 75% refund of your total contributions.

To request a refund, please call the district office between 8:00 AM and 4:30 PM, Monday through Friday. The deadline to request a refund is August 15, 2026.

Legals

Harvey Rural Ambulance Meeting

Harvey Rural Ambulance District Regular meeting, April 29 at 7:30 pm at the Ambulance bay.
President Doug Helm

(April 23, 2026)

BUS FOR SALE

The McClusky-Goodrich Public School District offers for sale for cash on sealed bids a 2005 Chevy Express Cutaway 28 passenger bus.

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