

# America's Farms Are a Front in the New Cold War

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

For far too long Washington has treated agriculture as a subsidy portfolio that occasionally bumped into national security policy. That posture is finally breaking.

The Trump Administration's whole-of-government National Farm Security Action Plan treats U.S. farmland, laboratories, and supply chains as national security assets.

That plan deepened with an MOU pairing the USDA with DARPA and the creation of the new USDA Office of Research, Economic, and Science Security.

“If the United States ever goes to war with an adversary, food and water will be as important as traditional military concerns, such as submarines or missiles.” That assessment was offered under oath in September 2025 by Dr. Cris Young—retired U.S. Army colonel, a former program director at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and professor of practice at Auburn University's College of Veterinary Medicine—before the House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Emergency Management and Technology.<sup>1</sup>

Young was one of four expert witnesses at the first of two hearings that the subcommittee has now held on the threat of agroterrorism. The second hearing, convened in February 2026, informed senior officials from Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the USDA, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Science and Technology Directorate, and the DHS Office of Health Security about whether the federal

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government's posture is adequate to the threat. What emerged during both hearings is the clearest public account to date of how hostile powers—principally the People's Republic of China (PRC)—are mapping, acquiring, and actively targeting the American food system.<sup>2</sup>

An example of one such case: On a July afternoon in 2024, a Chinese researcher cleared customs at Detroit Metropolitan Airport carrying four plastic baggies tucked into a wad of tissues in his backpack. The reddish plant material inside was *Fusarium graminearum*, a crop pathogen that causes head blight in wheat, barley, corn, and rice. Justice Department prosecutors later called it a potential agroterrorism weapon. The traveler first told CBP officers the samples had been planted on him. Then he admitted he had hidden them because he knew the law.<sup>3</sup> The material was bound for a University of Michigan plant-pathology laboratory where his girlfriend, a postdoctoral fellow from the PRC, was working. The lab had no USDA–Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service permit to study the pathogen. She had received PRC government funding for the same research in China. Court filings documented her membership in, and loyalty to, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). She pleaded guilty in November 2025 to smuggling a biological pathogen and lying to the FBI. Days earlier, the Justice Department indicted three more Chinese nationals connected to the same university on related smuggling charges.<sup>4</sup> Federal investigators have described the pattern as a persistent and enduring threat.

## A Matter of Counterintelligence

This is not a rural story or a regulatory story. It is a counterintelligence story, and it belongs in the same homeland security conversation as the Volt Typhoon intrusions into American utilities, the Chinese surveillance balloon, and the accretion of CCP-linked real estate around U.S. military installations from Grand Forks to Fort Bragg. American agriculture—land, laboratories, genetic stock, and data—is a target in the looming conflict with the PRC.

Dr. Marty Vanier, who directs Kansas State University's National Agricultural Biosecurity Center, reminded the subcommittee that agroterrorism is not an emerging novelty. Adversaries have used agricultural agents to damage food supplies, spread disease, and create fear for as long as states have competed. The Mau Mau movement poisoned British colonial cattle in 1952. Iraq developed wheat cover smut to attack Iranian crops in the 1980s.

What is new is scale, sophistication, and the willingness of a peer competitor with a coherent food-security doctrine to pursue agricultural collection and disruption as a matter of state policy. Dr. Daniel Wims, president of

Alabama A&M University, underscored the human consequence at the other end of that pressure: “Our farmers and producers throughout the Southeast are very open and very vulnerable. If they lose a season, they essentially lose the means to support their families and maintain their farms.”<sup>5</sup>

For two decades, Washington treated agriculture as a subsidy portfolio that occasionally bumped into national security policy. That posture is finally breaking. In July 2025, the Trump Administration rolled out the National Farm Security Action Plan, a whole-of-government strategy that, for the first time, treats American farmland, laboratories, and supply chains as national security assets rather than inputs to a commodity market. In February 2026, the effort deepened with a memorandum of understanding pairing the USDA with the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), and the creation of the new USDA Office of Research, Economic, and Science Security.<sup>6</sup> The USDA now also sits on the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS).

That last point matters. Former Heritage analyst Bryan Burack laid out the case for expanding the CFIUS to cover adversarial purchases of American agricultural land in his 2024 report “China’s Land Grab,” which documented that PRC ownership of U.S. farmland is underreported to the USDA by at least half.<sup>7</sup> Heritage’s “Winning the New Cold War” made the USDA’s inclusion in CFIUS an explicit recommendation.<sup>8</sup> The Administration has now adopted it. Congress should codify the change by passing Agricultural Foreign Investment Disclosure Act (AFIDA) reform legislation that hardens reporting requirements and tightens coordination between the USDA and the Treasury Department.

## The Cost of a Disbanded Watchdog

In February 2022, the Justice Department disbanded its dedicated China counterintelligence initiative under pressure from civil-liberties advocacy groups and university faculty, replacing it with a broader nation-state threats framework. What followed was not broader enforcement. It was less enforcement. The Michigan pathogen case is precisely the kind of case the earlier initiative was built to catch: PRC government-funded research, undisclosed affiliations, and biological materials smuggled past a permitting regime that exists for a reason. Heritage has called for reviving a dedicated PRC counterintelligence effort from the day the original was shut down.<sup>9</sup> The record now makes that case on its own. By the time CBP officers at Detroit opened that backpack, the deterrent against Beijing had been absent for more than two years.

While Washington was debating whether counterintelligence was culturally sensitive, Beijing was moving in the opposite direction. On December 29, 2023, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress passed a comprehensive Food Security Law. It took effect June 1, 2024. The statute formalizes state control over arable land, establishes a national germplasm bank, codifies emergency grain reserves, and defines food self-sufficiency as a state security obligation. CCP General-Secretary Xi Jinping has publicly called food security the foundation of national security. The PRC has expanded its foreign farmland holdings by orders of magnitude in a decade. It implemented a law to protect its own food base while actively acquiring positions in that of the United States.

The United States has no comparable statute. It has a plan, a growing body of executive action, and a patchwork of state laws of varying effectiveness. That is progress. It is not parity.

## Systemic Risks to U.S. Agriculture

The threat running through American agriculture is wider than any single pathogen. The USDA's senior homeland security official told the subcommittee at February's hearing that policymakers should not over-index on biothreats.<sup>10</sup> *Fusarium graminearum* is in fact endemic in American wheat; plant pathologists have managed it for a century. The harder problems are systemic. In a follow-on piece published after his congressional testimony, Young and two co-authors noted that PRC state-sponsored hackers have already infiltrated American critical infrastructure, including agricultural systems, with pre-positioned malware—the same Volt Typhoon pattern now documented across utilities and ports.<sup>11</sup> That is one thread.

Others include germplasm pipelines—position-navigation-and-timing dependencies on GPS-signals adversaries—which have demonstrated the ability to spoof cold-chain integrity and create cyber intrusions of food processors and cooperative databases. Dr. Wims pressed the point in his testimony: The country has not done a good job of marrying its agricultural science to the artificial intelligence and cybersecurity expertise that now determine whether the food system can be defended. “We have not done a good job with that,” he told the subcommittee.<sup>12</sup>

And then there is the drone problem, which is not what most Americans think it is. Roughly three-quarters of the commercial unmanned aircraft operating in American skies today were built by a single PRC manufacturer. Those airframes are not only flying over Iowa corn fields. They are flying near naval shipyards, pipelines, substations, and agricultural research

stations, collecting high-resolution data on crop patterns, soil chemistry, livestock concentrations, and access routes. The platform is not the real vulnerability. The data flow is. Article 7 of the PRC's 2017 National Intelligence Law obliges every Chinese company and citizen to cooperate with state intelligence work, and DHS threat advisories have concluded that the law compels Chinese firms to hand over data on request, without notifying the foreign customer. A drone that maps an American farm is not just a piece of hardware. By operation of law, it is a collection asset for the CCP. That is the same structural problem the Michigan pathogen case illustrates: American agricultural information and biological material flowing in one direction, under a legal regime that answers to Beijing.

## Overdue Ban Finally in Effect

Heritage has called for a federal ban on PRC-manufactured drones in government use since the publication of “Chinese-Made Drones: A Direct Threat Whose Use Should Be Curtailed” in 2020.<sup>13</sup> The federal procurement piece is now done. On December 22, 2025, the American Security Drone Act's two-year implementation window closed and the Federal Acquisition Regulation clause barring federal agencies from procuring or operating covered foreign drones took full effect. The day before, an executive-branch interagency body issued a National Security Determination, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) went beyond the fiscal year (FY) 2025 National Defense Authorization Act's (NDAA's) mandate by adding all foreign-produced unmanned aircraft systems and critical components to its Covered List. That action blocks new foreign-made drones from receiving the FCC authorization required to be legally imported, sold, or operated in the United States. The FY 2026 NDAA has since expanded the restriction to Chinese ground systems and closed loopholes around re-branding and shell companies. Two Trump executive orders—“Unleashing American Drone Dominance” and “Restoring American Airspace Sovereignty”—cemented the policy direction.<sup>14</sup>

What remains is the harder half. The installed Da-Jiang Innovations (DJI) fleet is still operating lawfully, and the United States does not yet have a domestic manufacturing base capable of matching Chinese price and performance at scale. First responders, farmers, and state and local governments will have to transition to compliant platforms, and that transition has to be supported by serious industrial policy, not wishful thinking about the market solving itself. Heritage has been clear on the principle: Restrict the adversary's access to the American market and build the domestic alternative at the same time.

The most damning testimony at the September 2025 hearing came from Dr. Asha George, executive director of the Bipartisan Commission on Biodefense. The Commission, co-chaired by former Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge and former Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, has been warning Congress about the inadequacy of the nation's environmental pathogen-detection system for a decade.<sup>15</sup> George's testimony was blunt: After seven years of trying to build a replacement for the legacy BioWatch program, the DHS Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office terminated the effort in 2024. The government still spends more than \$80 million a year on the existing, flawed system. "They are no closer to a more capable national biological detection system," she told the subcommittee, "than when I last testified before this very subcommittee six years ago."<sup>16</sup> That failure has persisted across Administrations. Congress should fund a real replacement, not another study.

None of this requires new agencies or a federal takeover of land use. Homeland Security Presidential Directive 9 designated the Food and Agriculture Sector as critical infrastructure in 2004.<sup>17</sup> Presidential Policy Directive 21 reaffirmed it in 2013.<sup>18</sup> The designations are not the problem. The problem is that for most of the intervening 22 years, the designation did not carry weight inside the interagency, in Congress, or in the universities that receive federal research dollars.

## Recommendations for the Justice Department, the Administration, and Congress

Four lines of effort would change that. First, the Department of Justice should:

**Rebuild a counterintelligence capability** focused on state-directed acquisition and infiltration in agriculture, biotech, and critical minerals; the Michigan pathogen case is Exhibit A for why the 2022 decision to disband the dedicated PRC effort was premature.

Second, the Department of Justice should:

**Defend the state laws already moving in the right direction.** Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Nebraska, and Tennessee have acted ahead of Washington, DC. Federal courts have begun rolling some of those laws back on 14th Amendment grounds. The Justice Department should defend them, not litigate against them.

Third, the Administration should:

**Give the USDA's new research security office real enforcement authority** over grant compliance, with power to disqualify institutions that fail to disclose foreign funding.

Fourth, Congress should:

**Pass AFIDA reform to codify the USDA's seat at CFIUS** and harden foreign-ownership reporting, and pair it with sustained federal investment in a domestic drone manufacturing base that can actually replace the installed foreign fleet.

## Conclusion

Smithfield Foods, which controls roughly one-eighth of the global pork supply, is owned by a Hong Kong-based company that retained a 90 percent stake when Smithfield returned to U.S. markets last year. Syngenta, one of the largest agrichemical firms operating on American soil, is ultimately controlled by a PRC state-owned enterprise. These are not theoretical vulnerabilities. They are present-tense structural features of the American food system, built during a period when Washington treated cross-border capital flows in agriculture as a matter of commerce rather than statecraft.

Returning to Young's submarines-and-missiles framing: What the two subcommittee hearings put on the record is that the people closest to this problem—military veterinarians, university presidents, biosecurity researchers, and career federal officials—all describe agriculture as a domain of state competition in which the United States has been slow to recognize the contest, slower still to contest it. The Trump Administration has taken the first serious steps in a generation to change that. Heritage has argued for those steps for years, across multiple scholars and multiple reports, and the record now shows the argument was right. The drone procurement ban is law. The USDA is at the CFIUS table. The National Farm Security Action Plan exists. The work is not complete. Congress must pass AFIDA reform, the Justice Department must rebuild counterintelligence capabilities, the universities must enforce disclosure, and the states must hold the line on farmland.

And the American producer, too often treated in Washington as an interest group to be managed, should be recognized for what the record now plainly shows: the first line of a homeland defense that begins long before the border.

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## Endnotes

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