



AUGUST 2, 2017 **BACKGROUND**

Sonny Perdue, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture (USDA)

INTRODUCTION

Sonny Perdue became the 31st U.S. Secretary of Agriculture on April 25, 2017, by a vote of 87-11. He previously served as the 81st Governor of Georgia from 2003 to 2011, becoming the first Republican to hold that office since Reconstruction. A veterinarian by education and training, Secretary Perdue owned and operated a number of agribusinesses prior to being elected to the Georgia State Senate in 1990 as a Democrat. He switched party affiliation in 1998. This memorandum provides an overview of his career, expressed opinions on relevant topics, and the response to his nomination from Congress and other stakeholders.

NOMINATED POSITION

Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

NOMINEE

George Ervin "Sonny" Perdue III

EDUCATION

B.S. and Doctor of Veterinary Medicine from the University of Georgia

AGE

70

PROFESSION

Agribusinessman, Governor, State Senator, Veterinarian

- Founder and Founding Partner, Perdue Partners (2011-present)
- Governor of Georgia (2003-2011)
- Senator, Georgia State Senate (1990-2001)
- President, Southeastern Grain and Feed Association (1988-1989)
- Founder and Operator, AGrowStar and Houston Fertilizer Grain (1980-1989)
- Veterinarian (1975-1979)
- Captain, United States Air Force (1971-1974)

FAMILY

Wife, Mary Ruff Perdue; four Adult Children; 14 Grandchildren

SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUE POSITIONS

- **Agricultural Philosophy**
 - Secretary Perdue has stressed that he intends to take a bipartisan approach to agriculture issues and is broadly committed to the various programs administered by the USDA. During his confirmation hearing, Secretary Perdue expressed concern about the 21 percent budget cut his agency faces under President Trump's FY 2018 budget and noted that he was not consulted about the proposed reductions as he had not yet been confirmed to his position. ([Committee on Agriculture Nomination Hearing](#))
 - On May 11, 2017, Secretary Perdue announced a reorganization of the USDA, including the establishment of an Undersecretary for Trade. The U.S. Forest Service would become a standalone agency and the position of Undersecretary for Rural Development would be abolished. The changes are being made under authority granted to USDA in the 2014 farm bill. ([Agriculture.com](#))
 - Aside from the ethics issues noted below, the most common criticism lodged against Secretary Perdue is his perceived closeness to agribusinesses, including his emphasis on agriculture commodity exporting. ([The Guardian](#))
- **Food, Nutrition and Consumer Safety**
 - Insurance and Subsidies
 - » While Secretary Perdue has not adopted specific positions regarding various crop insurance programs, during his confirmation hearing he expressed general support for the sugar and other crop insurance programs. ([Committee on Agriculture Nomination Hearing](#))
 - » During his time in agribusiness, between 1996 and 2004, Secretary Perdue received \$278,000 in USDA federal farm subsidies. ([USA Today](#))
 - Crop Diseases
 - » On May 3, 2017, Secretary Perdue and Acting U.S. Trade Representative Stephen Vaughn announced that they had successfully persuaded the European Union (EU) to amend its requirements for imports of U.S. citrus. Specifically, the EU dropped its requirement that U.S. groves be surveyed for citrus canker. ([USDA Press Release](#))
 - Food Stamps
 - » Republicans have signaled a desire to trim the \$70 billion food stamp program and during his confirmation hearing, Secretary Perdue noted that he believed the program could be administered more "efficiently and effectively." ([Committee on Agriculture Nomination Hearing](#))
 - » Secretary Perdue has been criticized for "increasing paperwork and work requirements for food stamp recipients" while he was governor. ([Atlanta Journal Constitution](#))
 - School Lunches
 - » Secretary Perdue supports loosening some requirements connected to former First Lady Michelle Obama's initiative to combat childhood obesity by overhauling the nation's school menus. On May 1, 2017, Secretary Perdue announced that schools could request an exemption from whole grain requirements, the reduced sodium mandate, and could begin serving 1 percent flavored milk rather than only nonfat. ([New York Times](#))
 - » In response to a question from Sen. John Boozman (R-Ark.), Secretary Perdue noted the importance of developing food assistance programs for children that need them during the summertime, when they are unable to receive free or reduced meals at school because of vacation. ([Washington Post](#))
 - Health and Safety Inspections
 - » As Governor of Georgia, Secretary Perdue oversaw deep cuts to the state budget, including the state's agriculture department. These cuts impacted Georgia's food safety inspection unit and may be linked to two salmonella outbreaks in the state. ([The Huffington Post](#))

- » In 2009, Governor Perdue signed a bill that blocked local communities in Georgia from regulating factory farms to address animal cruelty, pollution or other hazards. ([Animal Law Coalition](#))
- **Foreign Agricultural Services**
 - Immigration
 - » During his confirmation hearing, Secretary Perdue called immigration reform one of his top priorities. ([Committee on Agriculture Nomination Hearing](#))
 - » Also during his confirmation hearing, Secretary Perdue expressed a commitment to the seasonal workers program that many agricultural interests rely on for labor. Specifically, he expressed a willingness to allow dairy farmers to receive a similar exemption as goat and sheep ranchers, who are allowed to bring in immigrant labor on a year-round basis. ([Committee on Agriculture Nomination Hearing](#))
 - Trade
 - » During his confirmation hearing, Secretary Perdue asserted that “trade really is the answer” to farmers dealing with low crop prices. ([Committee on Agriculture Nomination Hearing](#))
 - » When President Trump considered withdrawing from the NAFTA treaty, it was reported that Secretary Perdue was among the Cabinet members who dissuaded him from taking that action. ([New York Times](#))
 - » Secretary Perdue has been clear that he views the opening up of Cuba’s economy to trade as a beneficial development for American agriculture. He noted that he led a delegation to Cuba in 2010 as governor and said “I think we would love to have Cuba as a customer,” while noting concerns about financing on their side. ([Committee on Agriculture Nomination Hearing](#))
- **Natural Resources and the Environment**
 - Forestry
 - » During his confirmation hearing, Secretary Perdue responded to a number of western senators’ concerns about forest fires with a commitment to reviewing the Forest Service budget to allocate more funding toward preventative measures. He noted that two-thirds of the Forest Service budget goes to fighting fires, which he believes is the inverse of how these funds should be allocated. ([Committee on Agriculture Nomination Hearing](#))
 - Conservation and Restoration
 - » When pressed by senators during his confirmation hearing, Secretary Perdue expressed concern about cuts to environmental programs proposed in the president’s FY 2018 budget, such as the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and Chesapeake Bay clean-up project. He admitted that he is “hopeful that the president’s infrastructure plan” would mitigate some of these concerns, and promised to be “a voice of reason” in the administration. ([Committee on Agriculture Nomination Hearing](#))
 - Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS)
 - » While President Trump has made a number of moves away from maintaining the RFS, including appointing an ethanol opponent to serve as EPA Administrator, Secretary Perdue is committed to maintaining it. At an event in Iowa on May 8, 2017, he said “ethanol is here to stay, and we’re going to work for new technologies to be more efficient,” while wearing a “Don’t mess with the RFS” pin on his jacket lapel. ([Washington Examiner](#))
 - Climate Change
 - » Despite a record of supporting conservation efforts when he was Governor of Georgia, including the establishment of \$100 million in funding for local governments to purchase lands for conservation, Secretary Perdue also has a history of questioning climate change. In 2014, he wrote “some on the left or in the mainstream media... have lost all credibility when it comes to climate science because their arguments have become so ridiculous and so obviously disconnected from reality.” ([Washington Post](#))
 - » During his confirmation hearing, Secretary Perdue stated “the jury is still out on whether humans are causing climate change.” ([The Guardian](#))

- Pesticides, Fertilizers and other Chemicals
 - » Before becoming governor, Secretary Perdue owned a fertilizer company, but otherwise has not taken
- Waters of the United States (WOTUS) Rule
 - » While Secretary Perdue has not spoken specifically about WOTUS, AGrowStar—a company owned by Perdue and his wife at the time—lent its support to a 2015 lawsuit challenging the rule. AGrowStar told the court that it was “engaged in operations or own properties affected by the WOTUS Rule.” ([The Daily Beast](#))
- Rural Development
 - On April 25, 2017, President Trump signed an executive order creating the Interagency Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity “to ensure the informed exercise of regulatory authority that impacts agriculture and rural communities.” Secretary Perdue will serve as the Task Force’s chairman. The Task Force will examine and consider, among other issues, current barriers to economic prosperity in rural America and how innovation and technology may play a role in long-term, sustainable rural development. ([USDA Press Release](#))
 - During his confirmation hearing, Secretary Perdue made clear that he supports several programs that could face cuts under President Trump’s budget, including those focused on developing rural infrastructure. He explicitly expressed a commitment to maintaining the Rural Utilities Service program, which supports development of water and waste treatment, electric power, and other infrastructure in rural areas. ([Washington Post](#))

RESPONSE TO NOMINATION

Reactions to the nomination of Secretary Perdue have been largely positive from both sides of the aisle. His confirmation vote in the Senate was one of the most bipartisan (87-11) for a member of President Trump’s cabinet. He received particular support from Democratic senators representing states in the upper Midwest, including North Dakota’s Heidi Heitkamp and Wisconsin’s Tammy Baldwin. Many industry groups also have expressed optimism about Secretary Perdue, largely due to his background as an agribusinessman and veterinarian, and their past support of his leadership on these issues in Georgia. Concerns about his nomination were lodged by some ethics groups regarding gifts Secretary Perdue received during his time as governor, as well as alleged kickback statutes he implemented during his tenure, however these were not questioned during his formal hearing. Nevertheless, maintaining his current level of bipartisan support could lead to Secretary Perdue playing especially influential role in 2018 farm bill negotiations.

ELECTED AND OTHER GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

- **President Donald Trump:** “Sonny Perdue is going to accomplish great things as secretary of Agriculture. From growing up on a farm to being governor of a big agriculture state, he has spent his whole life understanding and solving the challenges our farmers face, and he is going to deliver big results for all Americans who earn their living off the land.” ([Politico](#))
- **Senator Pat Roberts (R-KS), Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Chairman:** “The most important quality for the Agriculture Secretary to possess is a solid understanding of the tough economic challenges farmers and ranchers face due to three years of low prices, declining land values, and difficult lending conditions. As we write a new Farm Bill, the Secretary must understand that we are operating in a new landscape. Everyone in farm country is having a hard time. We need a Secretary who can recall the 1980s and will do everything within their power to make sure we do not return to those conditions. The Secretary must understand all aspects of the job. A strong understanding of agriculture, rural development, natural resources, and nutrition programs is a must. In addition,

the nominee must understand the effects of regulatory actions outside the Department of Agriculture and the importance of trade to our farmers and ranchers. We need an advocate for agriculture. I appreciated my conversation with Governor Perdue before his announcement and look forward to meeting with him again as the Committee completes a thorough confirmation process. Together, we must get to work addressing these immediate and future challenges." ([Press Release](#))

- **Senator Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Ranking Member:** "After a thorough review of his qualifications and priorities, I support the nomination of Governor Perdue to serve as Agriculture Secretary," said Stabenow. "Although we have some differences on policy, we share a commitment to support American agriculture and strengthen our small towns and rural communities. I look forward to working with Governor Perdue as we write the 2018 Farm Bill. Farmers and families in Michigan and all across rural America need a champion at USDA." ([Press Release](#))
- **Senator David Perdue (R-GA) (family member/first cousin):** "As it has been stated, Governor Perdue and I are first cousins. We grew up together. We have a strong family. It is an extended family. I've known this man all of my life. I can think of no one in the United States more qualified to be the next Secretary of Agriculture. In Joshua, it calls us to be strong and courageous. I know this man to be both strong and courageous. Today, he is going to answer all of your questions and the only thing I can say to him is, good luck, cuz." ([Press Release](#))
- **Rep. K. Michael Conaway (R-TX-11), House Committee on Agriculture Chairman:** "Agriculture is the backbone of our nation. However, America's farmers and ranchers are facing difficult times under current farm conditions, and they deserve a Secretary who will work diligently to turn those tides. As we begin working on the next Farm Bill, the Secretary will play a vital role in implementing positive changes for our producers and must understand every aspect of the job at hand. We need someone who is willing to work every day with the mindset of protecting America's farmers and ranchers, especially when it comes to introducing regulatory actions. I look forward to working with Sonny Perdue, especially on the committee's priorities as Congress begins its work toward the next Farm Bill." ([Press Release](#))
- **Rep. Sanford Bishop (D-GA-02):** "I am pleased by the President-elect's nomination of Sonny Perdue to lead USDA. I have a long working relationship with Governor Perdue since our time as members of the Georgia Senate, and I am confident in his ability to lead the Department. Governor Perdue, a trained veterinarian, is uniquely familiar with the importance of supporting farmers, ranchers, producers, and consumers, as Georgia boasts over 42,000 farms and an agricultural industry contributing over \$71 billion annually to the Georgia and national economies. Further, having spent most of his life in Bonaire, Georgia, he knows firsthand the needs, hopes, and aspirations of rural America and will bring exceptional insight to the Department in that regard." ([Press Release](#))

ADVOCACY, THINK TANK AND OTHER STAKEHOLDER ORGANIZATIONS

- **Former Congressman Phil Gingrey, Senior Advisor, District Policy Group at Drinker Biddle:** "I served with Secretary Perdue in the Georgia State Senate from 1998-2002. We were suitemates and close personal friends. In 2002, he ran Governor of Georgia at the same time that I ran for Congress. We were both victorious despite overwhelming odds against us. Secretary Perdue ran a courageous and innovative campaign to become the first Republican Governor of Georgia since Reconstruction." (Statement)
- **Collin O'Mara, President and CEO, National Wildlife Federation:** "As a hunter and angler, former Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue understands the importance of wildlife conservation. He has a record of working with both Republicans and Democrats to advance innovative land conservation programs, increase water conservation, restore longleaf pine forests, and expand recycling programs. We hope that Governor Perdue will clearly state his support for science-based decision-making and address previous statements on climate science." ([Press Release](#))
- **Tracy Brunner, President, National Cattlemen's Beef Association:** "Governor Perdue's an excellent pick to head the Agriculture Department. As a lifelong agri-businessman and veterinarian, as well as the two-term governor of a state where agriculture's the largest industry, Gov. Perdue has a unique and expert understanding of both the business and scientific sides of agriculture. In a time of increasing regulations and a growing governmental footprint, we have no doubt that Gov. Perdue will step in and stand up for rural America so that we can continue to do what we do best – provide the safest and most abundant food supply in the world." ([Press Release](#))
- **Roger Johnson, President, National Farmers Union:** "Having endured months of the current farm crisis and drastic policy changes in Washington without a Secretary of Agriculture, family farmers and ranchers are relieved that Sonny

Perdue has finally been confirmed to lead the U.S. Department of Agriculture. We are hopeful Perdue will provide rural America with a strong voice in Washington. NFU stands ready to assist the new Secretary as he navigates the myriad issues facing family agriculture and rural communities." ([Press Release](#))

- **Shirley Bloomfield, CEO, Rural Broadband Association:** "I congratulate Secretary Perdue on his confirmation as our nation's 31st secretary of agriculture," Bloomfield said. "NTCA's nearly 850 member companies leverage public and private capital, including initiatives in partnership with the Rural Utilities Service (RUS), to deploy advanced communications networks throughout rural America that translate into jobs and services for many sectors of the economy, including agriculture. We look forward to working with Secretary Perdue, RUS, and the entire Department of Agriculture to ensure the continued deployment and upgrade of rural broadband networks that yield benefits for all Americans." ([Press Release](#))
- **Zippy Duvall, President, American Farm Bureau Federation:** "I have known Gov. Perdue for years. I've seen firsthand his commitment to the business of agriculture as we worked together on issues facing farmers and ranchers in our home state of Georgia. He understands the challenges facing rural America because that's where he was born and raised. He is a businessman who recognizes the impact immigration reform, trade agreements and regulation have on a farmer's bottom line and ability to stay in business from one season to the next." ([Press Release](#))
- **Chuck Conner, President, National Council of Farmer Cooperatives:** "On behalf of America's farmer-owned co-ops, I would like to express our strong support of Governor Sonny Perdue's nomination to be the next Secretary of Agriculture. Having grown up on a farm and having worked as a veterinarian for many years, Governor Perdue has the understanding of agriculture and rural America critical to success in his new role. He also brings skills from his days as governor that will help in the management of a department as diverse as the U.S. Department of Agriculture." ([Press Release](#))
- **Jay Vroom, President and CEO, CropLife America:** "USDA is sure to benefit from his proven leadership and experience in managing a large government entity. His background as a veterinarian and direct connection to the farming community will help to enhance the relationship between the department and those on the ground in modern agriculture in every state who seek to make their voices heard." ([Press Release](#))
- **Daren Bakst, Research Fellow in Agricultural Policy, The Heritage Foundation:** "Farmers need freedom to do what they do best: provide us our food. In agricultural policy, freedom is too often lacking. If confirmed, Gov. Perdue should work diligently to free our nation's farmers from excessive regulation, stop government handouts that presume farmers can not compete in the marketplace like other businesses, and break down barriers to increase farmers' freedom to trade. Governor Perdue will have a great opportunity to make freedom in agriculture a priority – let's hope he does that." ([Press Release](#))
- **Bob Dinneen, President and CEO, Renewable Fuels Association:** "We congratulate Sonny Perdue on receiving approval by the Senate Agriculture Committee earlier today to be the next U.S. Secretary of Agriculture. Governor Perdue is certainly well qualified and well versed in agriculture issues, growing up on a farm and earning a doctorate in veterinary medicine. If confirmed, he will only be the third USDA Secretary to have been a farmer. As a result, Gov. Perdue appreciates the challenge facing farmers today, knows that building demand will be essential to rural economic stability, and certainly understands the importance of value-added markets like ethanol." ([Press Release](#))
- **Colin O'Neil, Agriculture Policy Director, Environmental Working Group:** ""In his campaign, President Trump promised to "drain the swamp" in Washington. But his nominee for secretary of agriculture, former Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue, is mired in ethical lapses, self-dealing and back-room deals that raise troubling questions about his fitness to run the department." ([Press Release](#))

About the District Policy Group

The bipartisan District Policy Group at Drinker Biddle is comprised of 15 lobbyists, public policy specialists, grassroots coordinators and other experienced government relations professionals—including former Congressman Dr. Phil Gingrey (R-GA).

Our team's extensive experience comes from working on Capitol Hill, within trade associations and advocacy organizations, and in the private sector. We have a long record of success in delivering insightful political and policy analyses, developing meaningful policymaker relationships, and advancing and achieving our clients' federal public policy goals.

For each representation we undertake, we carefully assemble a team of professionals with the specific experience, knowledge and relationships needed to meet the client's unique needs. We are nationally recognized for our lobbying work in health care, and also represent clients in other industries, such as agriculture, trade, environment, transportation and manufacturing.

Primary Contacts



Ilisa Halpern Paul, President

(202) 230-5145
Ilisa.Paul@dbr.com

Ilisa Halpern Paul leads the District Policy Group and has more than 25 years of experience in government relations, advocacy, and policymaking in non-profit, academic, federally-funded, and government settings. Ilisa's practice centers on advising clients with respect to advancing their federal legislative, regulatory and programmatic policy agendas. Her work has earned her the recognition as one of The Hill's Top Lobbyists of 2015 and 2016, as well as a feature story in *The Hill* regarding her rise to success.



The Honorable J. Phillip Gingrey, M.D., Senior Advisor

(202) 230-5163
Phil.Gingrey@dbr.com

Phil Gingrey is a senior advisor in the District Policy Group at Drinker Biddle. Dr. Gingrey is a former U.S. Congressman who served Georgia's 11th congressional district from 2003 to 2015. Throughout his 12 years in Congress, Dr. Gingrey served on numerous influential committees, including the House Committee on Energy & Commerce, which focused on issues such as energy, health care, telecommunications, environment and interstate commerce. As such, he is uniquely positioned to provide public policy and government relations counsel to clients on issues related to health care, energy and environment, education, communications, and life sciences. Also during his Congressional tenure, Dr. Gingrey served on the Committee on Education and the Workforce and the Committee on Armed Services.



Jodie Curtis, Executive Vice President

(202) 230-5147
Jodie.Curtis@dbr.com

Jodie Curtis focuses on federal policy, appropriations, and regulatory issues. She has more than 20 years of experience in government, Congressional affairs and representing the legislative and regulatory interests of for-profit, non-profit, and global organizations. Prior to joining the firm, Jodie served as an assistant director with a large national non-profit health care advocacy organization, deputy chief of staff for U.S. Representative Thomas M. Barrett (D-WI), executive assistant for U.S. Representatives Lynn Rivers (D-MI) and Peter Barca (D-WI), and district director/legislative assistant for Wisconsin State Senator Barbara Ulichny.



Laura H. Phillips, Partner, Drinker Biddle

(202) 842-8891
Laura.Phillips@dbr.com

Laura H. Phillips has been a leader in the telecommunications market for more than 25 years. She counsels wireless and wired technology entrepreneurs on issues related to the development of new technologies, including the development of spectrum auctions, network interconnection, access, universal service and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). She also represents clients in regulatory matters stemming from communications service convergence, the growth of wireless services and the Internet. Laura is chair of the firm's Government and Regulatory Affairs Practice Group.

