

U.S. Rep. Dina Titus Introduces OFF Act to Curb Misuse of Farmer Dollars in USDA's Checkoff Programs

WASHINGTON, DC, UNITED STATES, January 9, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Today, U.S. Rep. Dina Titus (D-NV) introduced the Opportunities for Fairness in Farming (OFF) Act to create a system of financial controls and transparency to reform USDA's agricultural checkoff programs. Earlier this year U.S. Sens. Mike Lee (R-UT), Cory Booker (D-NJ), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), and Rand Paul (R-KY) introduced identical companion legislation in the U.S. Senate.



Checkoff programs generate hundreds of millions a year, and past reviews have revealed that monies have been diverted by agribusiness trade associations for salaries and lobbying activities that often-run counter to the wishes of family farmers and utilized to push policies harmful to animals.

Congress originally intended to tax farmers and compel them to pay into a federal account for non-political promotion programs for their commodities.

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As it has played out in the real world, however, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, National Dairy Promotion Research Board and other leading trade groups got access to the till and now they divert tens of millions annually to their own associations for advocacy or anti-competitive activities that put a special hurt on small farmers.

“USDA's runaway checkoff programs must be held accountable, and family farmers have a right to know where their hard-earned dollars are being spent,” said [Marty Irby](#), executive director at Animal Wellness Action.

“The checkoffs remain under fire because of their lack of transparency, misuse of funds, and damaging anti-competitive practices that have bankrupted millions of American farmers.”

“The USDA's checkoff programs have operated without sufficient oversight for far too long - and this legislation will bring much-needed accountability and transparency,” said U.S. Rep. Dina Titus (D-NV). “Family farmers should not be forced to pay into organizations that sometimes lobby against their own interests and threaten animal welfare.”

“I don't want my hard-earned dollars funneled to a quasi-governmental organization that works

against my best interest and represents industrial agriculture's continued movement toward the monopolization of farming," said [Will Harris](#), president of the American Grass-fed Association. "We've farmed the same land in Georgia since 1866, and I want to ensure that future generations are able to continue to do the same."

"It's crisis time in agriculture where every penny counts," said Mike Eby, chairman of the [National Dairy Producers Organization](#). "If farmers are going to be forced to fund checkoff programs' "government speech," the very least farmers should expect is legitimate oversight and a system of checks and balances for all commodity checkoffs, and the OFF Act does just that."

Years ago, the Pork Board developed its "Pork: The Other White Meat" campaign. Yet, despite the exclusive use of checkoff funds to develop and promote the slogan, the NPPC claimed title to the trademark free of charge. Then, after the trademark had nearly exhausted its market value, the Pork Board bought back (with checkoff dollars) its own unlawful "gift" from the NPPC – for \$60 million. These federal funds are now being paid out every year in \$3 million installments, and they make up a third of the NPPC's annual budget.

The OFF Act would amend the authorizing checkoff laws to reaffirm that these programs may not contract with organizations that engage in policy advocacy, conflicts of interest, or anticompetitive activities that harm other commodities. It would also require that they publish all budgets and disbursements of funds for the purposes of public inspection and submit to periodic audits by the USDA Inspector General. The OFF Act is supported by organizations that represent more than 250,000 farmers, along with Animal Wellness Action, the Organization for Competitive Markets, Family Farm Action, and the Heritage Foundation.

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