

How RFK Jr. could cause an earthquake for American public health

Food additives, pesticides and vaccines are on his “Make America Healthy Again” hit list.



Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is President-elect Donald Trump's choice to lead the Department of Health and Human Services. | Mario Tama/Getty Images

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President-elect Donald Trump [will nominate](#) the anti-vaccine activist and environmental lawyer Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as secretary of Health and Human Services.

If the Senate confirms Kennedy, it will presage the biggest rethinking of the U.S. public health system ever. HHS and its agencies oversee drug approvals, food safety and disease surveillance, in addition to Medicare and Medicaid.

A scion of one of America's most famous Democratic families, Kennedy and his "Make America Healthy Again" movement blame Americans' poor health in part on a corrupt alliance among the food and drug industries and the regulators supposed to watch over them. They want to replace the bureaucrats and overhaul the systems for overseeing pesticides, food additives and vaccines.

Many Republicans in Congress say [they're open to Kennedy's ideas](#).

Here's what Kennedy and MAHA want to do:

Cut corporate influences out of regulation

Kennedy told MSNBC he'd like to see "[entire departments](#)" at the Food and Drug Administration, particularly nutrition regulators, let go. The agency's work includes setting nutrition guidance, overseeing food labeling and safety, and combating food-related ailments, such as obesity and heart disease.

That, of course, is in keeping with Trump's promise to "drain the swamp" and subdue the "deep state."

Jeff Hutt, spokesperson for the Make America Healthy Again PAC and former national field director for Kennedy's presidential campaign, said people aligned with the MAHA movement are assisting the Trump campaign in vetting candidates for appointments, and Kennedy has shared a website to crowdsource potential nominees for government jobs. (The Trump team declined to confirm the involvement of Kennedy's supporters in the transition.)

"When we talk about making America healthy, we really have to talk about corporate capture and the way that large corporations have captured our governmental agencies," Hutt said, adding a major goal of the movement is creating alternative research and political support to open a path for policymakers that isn't beholden to large industries.

That kind of overhaul could be difficult to pull off quickly, with agency employees possibly slowing plans for major changes. Companies and industry groups could take the administration to court, should they find a reason to argue the moves are unlawful. The full force of industry pushback has yet to spin up, several lobbyists said, instead waiting to see the extent to which Trump will actually incorporate MAHA ideas into his policy agenda.

But Republicans in Congress have also voiced interest in overhauling the agencies and distrust of the health system broadly.

"Science has been corrupted," Sen. Ron Johnson(R-Wis.) said Tuesday. "What can we do to get legitimate science that actually tells these things and end the capture of these federal agencies by large corporate interests?"

Ban pesticides and genetically modified organisms

While campaigning for Trump, Kennedy stood in front of the Agriculture Department headquarters in Washington [and said he wants to overhaul U.S. food production](#), ridding it of pesticides and genetically modified crops — key inputs for American farmers — that he says are making Americans sick. During his legal career, Kennedy sued pesticide makers, including Monsanto, then the Missouri-based maker of RoundUp.

MAHA's foes, lobbyists representing major food companies and commodity crops, are quietly meeting with key lawmakers to prevent Kennedy from getting the HHS post, according to an agriculture lobbyist with knowledge of the meetings.

Even before Trump's decisive victory, [dozens of the country's most prominent and influential farm groups](#) sent a letter to the four leaders of the House and Senate Agriculture committees, urging them not to bow to pressure to curtail pesticide use or mitigate access to genetically modified organisms.

But industry groups are threading a needle: Their farmer constituents have consistently and overwhelmingly backed Trump.

On the other hand, during Trump's first term, his EPA loosened regulations for pesticides and other crop inputs.

Crack down on food chemicals and additives

Kennedy wants to crack down on food chemicals. But as with pesticides, he faces a well-resourced industry with long-term relationships on Capitol Hill.

And just like the industry's defense of pesticides and herbicides, food companies argue that chemical and other food additives are already regulated and are safe.

Said one food industry lobbyist granted anonymity to discuss private conversations: "It's a little bit of fearmongering and playing on those anxieties that consumers have that are not necessarily based in science."

At the same time, while some on the left have long said that the government should tighten regulation of food additives and chemicals, they're skeptical that Kennedy's rhetoric will translate to policy changes.

"Folks are right to be worried about toxic food chemicals," said Scott Faber, a lobbyist for the Environmental Working Group, which has advocated for new state laws banning certain food additives. "They're wrong, based on his first term in office, to presume that President Trump will do anything about them."

Reexamine vaccine approvals

Kennedy is well known for touting the debunked claim that vaccines can cause autism. During the pandemic, he argued that Covid-19 shots were unsafe and has pointed to the government's system for approving vaccines as "agency capture on steroids."

He admits he's become one of the anti-vax movement's most prominent voices, despite insisting he's not part of that movement and has had his own children vaccinated. He says he wants to examine government vaccine safety data and communicate it to the public.

The vast majority of health experts and doctors support vaccine use, pointing to the long history of safe and effective shots that have nearly wiped out many diseases in the U.S. And they say the safety data is already a matter of public record.

Lyn Redwood, a nurse and long-time vaccine safety skeptic, is assisting Kennedy in his transition work with the Trump team, Hutt said. Redwood is president emerita of Children's Health Defense, a Kennedy-chaired nonprofit that promotes vaccine skepticism and stories of vaccine injury.

Kennedy's unsubstantiated claims about vaccines have concerned some lawmakers.

"He could be in an advisory role, but he should not be in an official role," said Rep. Larry Bucshon (R-Ind.), a cardiothoracic surgeon. "His views on, particularly, vaccinations are not mainstream and have not been."

Vaccine requirements for schoolchildren are decided at the state level, but guidance from federal agencies figures prominently in what shots are mandated.

Ban toxic chemicals

Kennedy has spent much of his career pushing for stricter regulation of hazardous chemicals.

Just days before the November election, [he put an obscure topic — fluoride in drinking water](#) — front and center when he said on X that the Trump administration would, on Inauguration Day, advise all U.S. drinking water systems to stop fluoridation.

While the American Dental Association and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend small amounts of fluoride be added to drinking water to prevent cavities, recent research has raised concerns about possible impacts on babies' and children's brains.

Kennedy's push for greater chemicals regulation is the direct inverse of what the first Trump administration did at EPA, where the president installed a [former chemicals industry lobbyist](#), Nancy Beck, to oversee the agency's toxic chemicals office, and David

Dunlap, a [former policy official](#) for Koch Industries, the Kansas-based industrial conglomerate, to oversee the agency's science office. The Trump EPA weakened the process for regulating toxic chemicals and [finalized a regulation](#) that would have limited the agency's ability to rely on studies looking at the effects of pollution on humans. The Biden administration rescinded it before it took effect.

As with other lobbyists for sectors Kennedy is targeting, those in the chemicals business declined to comment on the record.

"I don't know how much impact RFK Jr. is going to have. It's really hard to reach into the bureaucracies and make change if you know what you're doing and he doesn't," said one chemicals industry lobbyist, granted anonymity to speak frankly about internal strategy.

But the fluoride issue demonstrates how Kennedy is disrupting traditional political alliances.

While major environmental groups that have strongly opposed Trump have not weighed in on the fluoride debate, [influential scientists](#) and [public health experts](#) they're aligned with have raised concerns about fluoridation similar to those raised by Kennedy. In September, a federal judge in California appointed by former President Barack Obama ruled in favor of progressive anti-fluoride activists and ordered the EPA to regulate the chemical under the nation's primary toxic chemicals law