



Office of the Secretary
Washington, DC 20250

April 12, 2023

Dear Members of the Meat and Poultry Industry:

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) stands with the rest of the Biden-Harris Administration in our commitment to combating illegal child labor.

Since 2018, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has seen a 69 percent increase in children being employed illegally by companies. In the last fiscal year, the department found 835 companies it investigated had employed more than 3,800 children in violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act. In February, DOL announced that one of the nation's largest sanitation services providers for food processors had employed at least 102 children in hazardous occupations and had them working overnight shifts at 13 meat processing facilities owned by nine different companies. That same month, the Biden-Harris Administration announced an Interagency Taskforce to Combat Child Labor Exploitation.

The use of illegal child labor—particularly requiring that children undertake dangerous tasks—is inexcusable, and companies must consider both their legal and moral responsibilities to ensure they and their suppliers, subcontractors, and vendors fully comply with child labor laws. Companies in food manufacturing—particularly those with significant market power—need to be vigilant about the standards of their suppliers to help reduce systemic violations and abuses. To that end, we request that all actors in the food supply chain take important precautionary steps toward the following actions:

1. Determine whether illegal child labor is being used anywhere in your supply chain.
2. Include strong language in supplier, subcontractor, and vendor contracts to prohibit illegal child labor, including, but not limited to putting in place stronger sanctions for doing so, regular unannounced investigations of vendor activity, and more effective reporting, monitoring, or auditing where appropriate.
3. Adopt standards for suppliers, subcontractors, and vendors that will better guard against the use of illegal child labor, including, but not limited to, hiring high-road contractors—for sanitation services and otherwise—that create procedures for workers to report labor law violations without fear of retaliation, particularly those contractors that have effective and trusted partnerships with workers, unions, and/or community organizations.

The food industry and USDA have a shared commitment to ensure that there is zero tolerance for illegal child labor. In recent months, it has been brought to light that there is a growing problem in the industry, and we believe that together, we can develop meaningful strategies to prevent or eliminate illegal child labor. For USDA, this means that we will use our procurement and regulatory authorities to provide the necessary attention and increased oversight to curb this recent trend as quickly as possible.

We look forward to continued engagement with you on the necessary mechanisms for eliminating illegal child labor in your supply chains. Our colleagues at DOL stand ready to provide compliance assistance and best practices toward these ends.

Sincerely,

THOMAS J. VILSACK
Secretary