

## Union, Federal Workers Sue USDA Over Religious Messaging

By **Katherine Smith**

Law360 (May 13, 2026, 5:35 PM EDT) -- The National Federation of Federal Employees and a group of federal workers are accusing the secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture of unlawfully imposing her religious views on a "captive audience" of agency employees through agency emails, according to a lawsuit filed in California federal court Wednesday.



The secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture has been accused by federal workers of "proselytizing" her religious beliefs via emails. (iStock/David Tran)

In the complaint, the union and USDA employees argued that the "proselytizing" religious communications sent by USDA Secretary Brooke L. Rollins are unconstitutional, claiming that the messages leverage her authority at the agency to pressure workers into believing in her specific Christian beliefs.

The messages have also pressured USDA employees with differing beliefs and identities to hide them in the workplace out of fear of retaliation, the complaint says.

"Notwithstanding that fear of retaliation, plaintiffs from across the agency together bring this action to vindicate their constitutional right to be free from the government imposition of religion and to stop the

secretary from further pressuring and intimidating them — and other USDA employees who may be afraid to come forward," the complaint states.

The complaint alleges that Rollins has subjected USDA employees to religious messaging since she was sworn in as secretary in February 2025.

While the messages initially appeared to be non-denominational, Rollins abruptly changed course in a Dec. 23 email, the complaint claims. The email wished all agency employees a Merry Christmas, and included a video message of her "preaching" to the workers, the complaint says.

In an April 5 email to USDA workers celebrating Easter, Rollins stated "today we celebrate the greatest story ever told, the foundation of our faith, and the abiding hope of all mankind," the complaint says.

The NFFE and individual USDA employees in the suit say the email contained a message the complaint refers to as "the Easter Sermon." The message described how Jesus Christ was "raised from the dead," and included multiple biblical references promoting Christianity that it "evangelizes as fact," according to the complaint.

"The denominational favoritism conveyed in Secretary Rollins's communications indoctrinates USDA employees and has caused them to feel coerced, unwelcome, excluded, and like outsiders to the agency," the complaint states.

During her time as USDA Secretary, Rollins has also failed to send any messages acknowledging or celebrating the holidays of other religions, the complaint alleges.

"That disparity is particularly stark in the case of the Easter Sermon, which Secretary Rollins sent during Passover, one of the most important Jewish holidays of the year," the complaint states.

The individual USDA employees in the suit say they feel Rollins is pressuring them to believe in her faith or act as if they do, and fear they will be retaliated against if they express their own beliefs or identities at work, "given the secretary's clear religious preference."

NFFE, which is affiliated with the International Association of Machinists and represents more than 110,000 government employees, similarly claims that Rollin's communications have discouraged its members who work for the USDA from sharing their own diverse religious beliefs and practices.

The complaint claims that the communications violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which bars the federal government from establishing an official preference for one religion.

The communications also violate the Administrative Procedure Act, as it departs from previous USDA policy on sending religious messages, the complaint alleges.

Specifically, the complaint says the communications go against a policy adopted by the agency in November, which directs officials to refrain from using their authority to pressure employees on their religious beliefs.

The NFFE and the individual employees are asking the court to declare the USDA's policy of sending "proselytizing Christian messages" to agency workers is unconstitutional, and enjoin the agency and Rollins from continuing to send those types of communications to its employees.

"Secretary Rollins' Easter message is a particularly egregious example of Trump administration officials abusing the power of public office to impose their beliefs on others and promote one narrow view of Christianity," Rachel Laser, president and CEO of Americans United, said in a Wednesday press release from Democracy Forward.

A USDA spokesperson told Law360 in a Wednesday statement that "while we do not comment on pending litigation, we will keep the plaintiffs in our prayers during this process."

Representatives for the union and individual employees did not immediately respond to a request for comment Wednesday.

The NFFE and individual employees are represented by Bryan Schwartz and Sam Goity of Bryan Schwartz Law, by Rebecca S. Markert, Amy Tai, Jenny Samuels and Elias Daiute of Americans United for Separation of Church and by State and by Sarah Goetz, Ayesha Khan and Elena Goldstein of the Democracy Forward

Foundation.

Counsel information for the USDA was not immediately available.

The case is National Federation of Federal Employees et al. v. United States Department of Agriculture et al., case number 3:26-cv-04406, in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California.

--Editing by Amy Rowe.