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# Leadership

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## **Dr. Michael Watson, Administrator**



Dr. Michael Watson was appointed the Administrator of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service in December 2023 after serving as Acting Administrator for 10 months. As Administrator, Dr. Watson carries out the Agency's multiple missions of protecting the health and value of American agriculture; mitigating the impact of human-wildlife conflict to protect agriculture, the environment, and human health and safety; ensuring the safe and timely availability of new genetically engineered technologies; and administering the Animal Welfare and Horse Protection Acts.

Before being named as Acting Administrator, Dr. Watson served as Associate Administrator since January 2018 where he oversaw the Agency's day-to-day operations. Prior to joining the Administrator's office, Dr. Watson served as the Associate Deputy Administrator for the Marketing and Regulatory Programs Business Services (MRPBS), where he also spent time as the Director of the Human Resources Division, leading the delivery of human resource services for APHIS, the Agricultural Marketing Service, the Foreign Agricultural Service, and the Merit Systems Protection Board.

Dr. Watson has a wealth of Federal experience having worked for several different Departments. He began his federal career in 1994 at USDA's Agricultural Research Service where he worked as a plant pathologist for three years. He went on to hold positions with the Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration, before beginning his APHIS career with Biotechnology Regulatory Services in 2003. After serving in several BRS roles over 7 years, Dr. Watson moved to Plant Protection and Quarantine where he served as the Associate Executive Director and Executive Director for Plant Health Programs and the Associate Deputy Administrator for Policy Management during his 5 years with the program.

Dr. Watson received his bachelor's degree in microbiology from the University of Maryland, College Park in 1987 and his doctorate in plant pathology from the University of California, Davis in 1994. A Maryland native, Dr. Watson resides in Davidsonville, MD.

## **Dr. Donna Lalli, Associate Administrator**



Dr. Donna Lalli was appointed Associate Administrator in October 2023. In this role, she works in partnership with Administrator Dr. Mike Watson to carry out the Agency's day-to-day operations, represent APHIS on Department-level and cross-Agency working groups, and oversee the activities of every APHIS program area and support unit on behalf of employees and stakeholders.

Prior to being appointed as Associate Administrator, Dr. Lalli acted in this role for more than 8 months since February 2023. From January 2021 until her joining the Office of the Administrator, Dr. Lalli served as the Associate Deputy Administrator for Wildlife Services, providing executive leadership to the Agency's National Feral Swine Damage Management Program, the National Rabies Program, and the Airport Wildlife Hazards Program.

For 10 months she served on a temporary assignment as Senior Policy Advisor in the Executive Office of the President, Office of Science and Technology Policy, after serving as the APHIS Science Advisor from 2017-2020. Dr. Lalli started her APHIS career with Biotechnology Regulatory Services as a biotechnologist and then as the program's chief of staff. Before joining APHIS, Dr. Lalli worked for USDA's Agricultural Research Service where she worked as a postdoctoral researcher at the Appalachian Fruit Research Station in Kearneysville, WV. Dr. Lalli has a Ph.D. in genetics and a bachelor of science degree in biochemistry from Clemson University.

## **Michelle Wenberg, Associate Administrator**



Michelle Wenberg was appointed Associate Administrator in February 2024. In this role, she works in partnership with Administrator Dr. Michael Watson and fellow Associate Administrator Dr. Donna Lalli to carry out the Agency's day-to-day operations, represent APHIS on Department-level and cross-Agency working groups, and oversee the activities of every APHIS program area and support unit on behalf of employees and stakeholders.

Prior to being appointed as Associate Administrator, Ms. Wenberg was APHIS' Deputy Administrator for Policy and Program Development (PPD) since 2021, providing leadership for the overall planning and direction of policies at APHIS. She was responsible for leading the Agency's budget and regulatory development processes; economic, risk, and environmental analyses related to proposed regulations and other APHIS program actions; and strategic planning, program reviews, and process improvements to advance program performance across APHIS.

From 2019 to 2021, Ms. Wenberg served as Chief of PPD's Planning, Evaluation, and Decision Support unit, where she was responsible for providing management consulting services such as strategic and operational planning, business process improvements, workload analysis, and other analytical products and services for developing and improving APHIS programs. From 2005 to 2019, she was the APHIS Budget Officer/Chief of PPD's Budget and Program Analysis Staff and led the development, justification, and monitoring of the Agency's \$2.5 billion annual operating budget that supported approximately 8,000 employees and mission activities around the world.

Earlier in her career, Ms. Wenberg held positions in Wildlife Services, Marketing and Regulatory Programs Business Services, and Plant Protection and Quarantine, and served on a yearlong detail with the U. S. Senate Committee on Appropriations.

Ms. Wenberg received a Bachelor of Science in Business and Management from the University of Maryland. She also is a graduate of the American University's School of Public Affairs KEY Executive Leadership Program, and USDA's Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Program.

Ms. Wenberg resides in Northern Virginia with her husband and two children.

# **Sarah Helming, Deputy Administrator, Animal Care**

Sarah Helming was appointed Deputy Administrator in August 2024. In this role she leads Animal Care's many employees in protecting and ensuring the welfare of millions of animals nationwide that are covered under the Animal Welfare Act (AWA) and Horse Protection Act (HPA).

Prior to this appointment, Ms. Helming served as Deputy Administrator for Emergency and Regulatory Compliance Services since October 2023, where she oversaw APHIS' select agents and toxins, investigative and enforcement, biodefense, and emergency management, safety and security programs. While there, she implemented significant reforms, initiating an evaluation and assessment of current, long-standing investigative and enforcement processes and procedures, changes that have realized major efficiencies and improvements.

Also, from April to July in 2024, Ms. Helming was asked to co-lead the U.S. Department of Agriculture's and Health and Human Services' response to the detection of highly pathogenic avian influenza in cattle, standing up a unified coordinating group, identifying needed working groups across all government sectors to achieve a shared vision to managing this one-health event.

Ms. Helming joined APHIS in 2014 and has held various positions throughout the Agency including Associate Deputy Administrator for Emergency and Regulatory Compliance Services and Chief of Staff for the Office of the Administrator. She also served in roles in APHIS International Services, Veterinary Services and Legislative and Public Affairs. In 2021, Ms. Helming served as USDA's Supply Chain Coordinator overseeing the \$4 billion USDA received from the American Rescue Plan Act to transform the U.S. food system.

Prior to joining APHIS, Ms. Helming worked for various government entities, including as a congressional staffer in the U.S. Congress, counsel in the Nevada Legislature, and in Nebraska Health and Human Services, focusing on bioterrorism and public health emergency law. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Indiana University and a Juris Doctor from the University of Nebraska. She is an Indiana

native and currently resides in Alexandria, Virginia.

## **Bernadette Juarez, Deputy Administrator, Biotechnology Regulatory Services**



Bernadette Juarez was appointed Deputy Administrator in August 2019. In this role, she provides leadership and direction to ensure the safe development and introduction (importation, interstate movement, and field testing) of genetically engineered organisms.

Prior to this appointment, Ms. Juarez served as Deputy Administrator for Animal Care since 2016, where she led the program's many employees in protecting and ensuring the welfare of millions of animals nationwide that are covered under the Animal Welfare Act (AWA) and the Horse Protection Act (HPA). She also oversaw the collaborative work done to assist pet owners and regulated facilities prepare for natural disasters and emergencies.

Ms. Juarez joined APHIS in 2009, first as Investigative and Enforcement Services' Deputy Director for nearly 5 years and then as Director starting in 2013. As Director, Ms. Juarez was responsible for leading investigations of alleged violations involving APHIS-administered laws and pursuing enforcement actions where warranted. Before coming to APHIS, Ms. Juarez was a trial attorney in USDA's Office of the General Counsel from 2002 to 2009.

In 1999, Ms. Juarez completed her bachelor's in business administration from the University of New Mexico. She went on to earn her juris doctor from American University, Washington College of Law, in 2002.

Although originally from New Mexico, Ms. Juarez currently resides in Silver Spring, MD, with her husband Brian and two children, Concetta and Miles.

## **Ibrahim Shaqir, Deputy Administrator, APHIS International Services**



Ibrahim M. Shaqir was appointed Deputy Administrator for APHIS International Services in January 2025. Prior to this new role, he was the Director of the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC) with USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) since June 2024. In that role, he led BARC's mission-critical initiatives, overseeing a team of 600 employees and managing an annual budget of \$110 million. Under his leadership, BARC advanced groundbreaking research in agricultural productivity, pest management, food safety, environmental conservation, and innovative technologies to address the complex challenges facing global agriculture.

Mr. Shaqir also served as Associate Deputy Administrator for Trade in APHIS' Plant Protection and Quarantine program from 2020-2024, where he championed phytosanitary standards and facilitated international trade by resolving complex agricultural trade barriers. He was instrumental in fostering global market access for U.S. agricultural products through science-based regulatory solutions.

From 2016 to 2020, Mr. Shaqir was Associate Deputy Administrator for APHIS Biotechnology Regulatory Services, where he spearheaded the modernization of USDA's biotechnology regulations through the SECURE Rule, the most significant policy revision in 30 years. His leadership established a science- and risk-based regulatory framework, enabling the U.S. to remain at the forefront of agricultural innovation while harmonizing global biotechnology standards.

Earlier in his career, Mr. Shaqir spent 15 years with ARS holding various leadership positions, including Director of the Office of International Research Programs (2009–2016) and an International Affairs Specialist for the Middle East and North Africa, promoting science diplomacy and multilateral research initiatives.

Notable highlights of Mr. Shaqir's career include a 2012 detail to the U.S. Institute of Peace, where he co-led a National Academy-USIP Roundtable initiative on using agricultural extension systems for peacebuilding and conflict management. In 2007, he served as Acting Environment, Science, Technology, and Health Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv as part of the State Department's Embassy Science Fellowship program.

Mr. Shaqir holds a Bachelor of Science in International Environmental Studies and Agricultural Economics, and a Master's in International Finance. He is a graduate of the Harvard Kennedy School Senior Executive Fellows Program and the American University School of Public Affairs USDA Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Program. With a career spanning over two decades, Mr. Shaqir is recognized for his visionary leadership, technical expertise, and unwavering commitment to advancing agricultural science and innovation on a global scale.

## **Dr. Mark Davidson, Deputy Administrator, Plant Protection and Quarantine**





Dr. Mark Davidson was appointed Deputy Administrator for Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) in May 2022 after acting in the position since January 2022. In this position, he leads and directs a nationally dispersed staff that safeguards U.S. agriculture and natural resources against the entry, establishment, and spread of economically and environmentally significant pests and diseases and facilitates the safe global trade of agricultural products.

Prior to becoming PPQ's Deputy Administrator, Dr. Davidson served as an APHIS Associate Administrator since August 2019, where he worked in partnership with the Administrator to carry out the Agency's day-to-day operations, represent APHIS on Department-level and cross-Agency working groups, and oversee the activities of every APHIS program area and support unit on behalf of employees and stakeholders.

From February 2018 to August 2019, Dr. Davidson served as the Deputy Administrator for Marketing and Regulatory Programs Business Services, where he was responsible for providing human resource management; financial management; acquisition and asset management; as well as support services, such as information technology; emergency management, safety, and security; and investigative services to APHIS and the Agricultural Marketing Service.

Before joining APHIS in 1998, Dr. Davidson spent two years with USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service. Then, after joining APHIS, he spent 19 years with Veterinary Services (VS) in various positions in the field, their regional office in Fort Collins, CO, and in Riverdale, MD. From November 2013 to February 2018, Dr. Davidson served as VS' Associate Deputy Administrator, where he provided planning, policy, program, and regulatory oversight and implementation for VS' National Import Export Services

activities focusing on safeguarding U.S. animal health and facilitating trade in animals and animal products.

Dr. Davidson received his D.V.M. and master's degree in veterinary pathology from Auburn University and his bachelor's degree in agriculture from Western Kentucky University.

## **Dr. Rosemary Sifford , Deputy Administrator Veterinary Services, and Chief Veterinary Officer**



Dr. Rosemary Sifford began her career with USDA as a Saul T. Wilson Scholar in 1997. Since that time, she has served APHIS in a variety of positions, crossing policy and operations in Veterinary Services, Plant Protection and Quarantine and Animal Care. She has served in the field and in a variety of management positions, most recently as the Associate Deputy Administrator for Animal Care.

Dr. Sifford received undergraduate degrees in Animal Science and Agricultural Business Management from NCSU in 1996 and her DVM from NCSU in 2000. She has completed several leadership development programs within USDA including completing the SES Candidate Development Program in 2014.

Dr. Sifford is married to the Reverend Stephen Sifford. They have three daughters, Madison, Salem, and Sedona. As a family they enjoy all things livestock and raise Hereford and Holstein cattle.

## **Jessica Fantinato, Deputy Administrator, Wildlife Services**



Jessica Fantinato was appointed Deputy Administrator for APHIS Wildlife Services (WS) in January 2025. Prior to this new role, Ms. Fantinato spent four years as an Associate Deputy Administrator in WS. In this role, she provided executive leadership to the National Rabies Management Program, the Airport Wildlife Hazards Program and the Operational Support Staff, where she oversaw all the program's administrative functions, including budget, fleet, purchasing, travel and human resources, as well as NEPA and wildlife operations support.

Prior to this position, Ms. Fantinato served as the Director of the USDA Office of Homeland Security, where she was responsible for, among other things, coordination of the Department's continuity of operations program, oversight of personnel and document security across USDA, and interfacing with the White House National Security Council staff on USDA equities in homeland security-related issues.

From 2011 through 2018, Ms. Fantinato worked in a variety of roles at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Her last position at HHS was as the Deputy Director of the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) under the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR). Her responsibility there included oversight of all nine divisions within OEM, to include the Hospital Preparedness Program, which provides grants to healthcare coalitions, and the National Disaster Medical System, which maintains a roster of over 5,000 medical professionals ready to deploy for a disaster. Prior to that, she served as the Resilience and Infrastructure Coordination Division Director where she was responsible for the oversight and management of the Department's Continuity of

Operations (COOP) and Critical Infrastructure Protection (CIP) programs. In this role, she played an integral part in HHS' preparedness for any disruptions to the mission essential functions of the Department's 17 Staff Divisions and 10 Operating Divisions and oversaw the Healthcare and Public Health public-private partnerships fostered through the Government and Sector Coordinating Councils.

Before joining HHS, Ms. Fantinato spent 18 years with USDA. The positions she held prior to her departure were both Chief of the Homeland Security Division and acting Chief of the COOP Division within the USDA Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Coordination. However, from August 2009 through September 2010, she was the Director of Continuity Policy on the White House National Security Staff (NSS). While working for NSS, she coordinated the implementation of the National Continuity Policy across the Executive, Judicial and Legislative Branches.

Ms. Fantinato also held a variety of positions within APHIS early in her career, to include Assistant to the APHIS Administrator for Homeland Security issues. She began her federal career as a wildlife biologist with WS, working in the New Jersey, Virginia, and Utah WS programs.

She holds a Bachelors' degree in Biological Basis of Behavior and a Master's degree in Conservation Biology, both from the University of Pennsylvania.

## **Abbey Fretz, Deputy Administrator, Legislative and Public Affairs**



Abbey Fretz was appointed Deputy Administrator for APHIS Legislative and Public Affairs (LPA) in January 2025. Prior to this new role, Ms. Fretz spent 5 years as LPA Associate Deputy Administrator, providing leadership to LPA's staff focused on media and industry outreach, legislative analysis, Freedom of Information and Privacy Act requests, production of informational materials, and response to media, congressional, intergovernmental, and citizen inquiries about APHIS programs. Ms. Fretz spent much of her earlier career leading congressional relations across USDA, including serving as USDA Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, USDA Director of Congressional Relations, and APHIS Legislative Director, along with congressional relations roles at the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. Ms. Fretz also held acting roles as a trade director on PPQ's Phytosanitary Issues Management staff and as a project manager in the USDA Office of Human Resources Management. In addition, Ms. Fretz led several APHIS- and USDA-wide initiatives, including establishing the APHIS Excellence in Science Communication Program, serving as the national mandatory mobilization coordinator for the 2022 highly pathogenic avian influenza outbreak, and leading the USDA National Bio- and Agro-Defense Facility (NBAF) Coordination Committee.

Ms. Fretz graduated from the University of Florida with a bachelor's degree in both animal science and agricultural education and communication and from The George Washington University with a master's degree in public administration. She also is a graduate of the American University's School of Public Affairs KEY Executive Leadership Program, and USDA's Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Program. Ms. Fretz lives in Maryland with her husband and two boys, where she enjoys all things outside, cooking and baking, and volunteering with local youth organizations.

**Melissa A. Tharp, Deputy Administrator,  
Marketing and Regulatory Programs Business  
Service and Chief Operating Officer, Marketing  
and Regulatory Programs**



Melissa A. Tharp is Marketing and Regulatory Programs' (MRP) Chief Operating Officer and the Deputy Administrator for Marketing and Regulatory Programs Business Services (MRPBS) within the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). This follows her appointment in February 2019 as MRPBS' Associate Deputy Administrator. In her role, Ms. Tharp leads MRPBS' Acquisition and Asset Management Division, Financial Management Division, Human Resources Division, and Information Technology Division with a workforce of more than 725 administrative management professionals who provide a wide range of business services to the MRP Mission Area and several customer agencies.

Previously, Ms. Tharp served as the Associate Deputy Administrator for the Agricultural Marketing Service's (AMS) Management and Analysis Program (MAP) for 6 years responsible for their Budget, Compliance, Performance and Administrative Management Activities. Accomplishments in this role include a unified user fee formula for the Agency, the development of the first AMS Human Capital Plan, the Agency's Strategic Plan, and Agency Head Assessment Report. During this time, Ms. Tharp completed two 6-month details in 2018 as the acting APHIS' Associate Deputy Administrator for MRPBS and AMS' Deputy Administrator for Science and Technology (S&T) where she focused on customer service, outreach, and technology innovations to both the domestic and international communities.

Melissa began working in USDA's AMS Tobacco Program in 1987. During her tenure with the Agency, she served in several leadership positions including AMS' Budget Officer and Deputy Associate Administrator.

Melissa grew up in Northern Virginia and attended George Mason University and Lord Fairfax Community College. She is married to husband Charles and has two children – daughter Catherine who is 26 and son Charles or 'Chuckie' who is 24. In her free time, she enjoys cooking, gardening, reading, and spending time with her

family. Melissa and her family reside in Warrenton, Virginia.

## **Sherron Jernigan, Director, Office of Civil Rights**



Sherron Jernigan was appointed as the Director of the Office of Civil Rights in July 2021. In this role, she ensures APHIS and its clients are in compliance with the provisions of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) and Civil Rights laws, workforce diversity programs, Federal regulations and Departmental/Agency-wide policies.

Before assuming this role, Mrs. Jernigan was Director of the Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) Equal Employment Opportunity/Affirmative Employment Office (EEO/AEO), where her responsibilities included providing regulatory guidance and oversight for the 162 EEO Programs within the Administration. From 2011 - 2018, she served as a national EEO Manager in VHA's Central Office, where among other things, she redesigned the EEO/AEO dashboard to interface measurable EEO principles into VHA's daily operations.

Though she started her VA Career in 1995 as a Low Vision Rehabilitation Specialist, she quickly moved into the arena by serving as a collateral duty Special Emphasis Program Manager. For 10 years she held a distinguish career as an EEO Manager at the Veteran Affairs Medical Center, by creating EEO tools, innovative initiatives and implementing conflict resolution programs.

Mrs. Jernigan earned a bachelor of science degree in biology from Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, AL, and a master of science in Low Vision Rehabilitation from Pennsylvania College of Optometry in Philadelphia, PA. She is a native of Tennessee and now resides in Southern Maryland.



## **Karen Ratzow, Deputy Administrator, Policy and Program Development**



Karen Ratzow was appointed APHIS' Deputy Administrator for Policy and Program Development (PPD) in September 2024. In this role, she provides leadership for the overall planning and direction of policies at APHIS. Ms. Ratzow is responsible for leading the Agency's budget and regulatory development processes; economic, risk, and environmental analyses related to proposed regulations and other APHIS program actions; and strategic planning, program reviews, and process improvements to advance program performance across APHIS.

Prior to being appointed as PPD Deputy Administrator, Ms. Ratzow was the Agency's Budget Officer/Chief of PPD's Budget and Program Analysis Staff for five years and the Assistant Chief/Deputy Budget Officer for a number of years prior. In these roles, she developed, justified, and monitored the Agency's more than \$3 billion annual operating budget and served as a key spokesperson for APHIS on budget, policy, and program performance related issues. During that time, Ms. Ratzow also served on details to Biotechnology Regulatory Services and the U.S. House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee.

Ms. Ratzow began her APHIS career in PPD's Environmental Analysis staff, and then went on to join PPD's Planning, Evaluation, and Decision Support staff, where she supported the Agency's efforts to implement the Government Performance and Results Act and subsequent performance legislations. Ms. Ratzow helped develop APHIS's Strategic Plans through the years and conducted program reviews that helped inform decisions and actions.



Ms. Ratzow earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Business and Management and Master of Science degree in Applied Management from the University of Maryland.

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