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# Leadership

Last Modified:

## Dr. Michael Watson, Administrator



Dr. Michael Watson was appointed the Administrator of APHIS 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. Before 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 3 years. He went on to hold positions with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, before beginning his APHIS career with Biotechnology Regulatory Services (BRS) 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.

## **Michelle Wenberg, Associate Administrator**



Michelle Wenberg was appointed Associate Administrator in February 2024. In this role, she works in partnership with Administrator Michael Watson and fellow Associate Administrator Sarah Helming 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.

Before 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 year-long 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 is also 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, Associate Administrator**

Sarah Helming was appointed Associate Administrator in July 2025. In this role, she works in partnership with Administrator Mike Watson and fellow Associate Administrator Michelle Wenberg 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.

Before this appointment, Ms. Helming served as Deputy Administrator of Animal Care since August 2024. In this role, she led 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 her time in Animal Care, 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.

In addition, from April to July 2024, Ms. Helming was asked to co-lead the USDA and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' joint response to the detection of highly pathogenic avian influenza in cattle, standing up a unified coordinating group and 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.

Before 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, VA.

## **Bernadette Juarez, Deputy Administrator, Animal Care**



Bernadette Juarez returned to Animal Care (AC) as the Deputy Administrator in July 2025. In this role, Ms. Juarez leads AC'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 oversees collaborative work to help pet owners and regulated facilities prepare for natural disasters and emergencies. Ms. Juarez previously held the same AC leadership role from 2016 to 2019.

Prior to her latest appointment, Ms. Juarez served as Deputy Administrator for Biotechnology Regulatory Services since 2019. In this role, she provided leadership and direction to ensure the safe development and introduction (importation, interstate movement, and field testing) of genetically engineered organisms.

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.

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

## **Dr. Donna Lalli, Deputy Administrator, Biotechnology and Regulatory Services**



Dr. Donna Lalli was appointed Deputy Administrator of Biotechnology Regulatory Services (BRS) in July 2025. In this role, Dr. Lalli provides leadership and direction to ensure the safe development and introduction (importation, interstate movement, and field testing) of genetically engineered organisms.

Before this appointment, Dr. Lalli served as APHIS' Associate Administrator since 2023. In this role, she worked in partnership with Administrator 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.

From January 2021 until 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 Management Program, and the Airport Wildlife Hazards Program.

For 10 months, Dr. Lalli 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 to 2020. Dr. Lalli started her APHIS career with BRS as a biotechnologist and then as the program's chief of staff. Before joining APHIS, Dr. Lalli worked for USDA's Agricultural Research Service 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 in biochemistry from Clemson University.

## **Hallie Zimmers - Deputy Administrator, Emergency and Regulatory Compliance Services**



Hallie Zimmers was appointed Deputy Administrator of Emergency and Regulatory Compliance Services (ERCS) in December 2025. In this role, Ms. Zimmers oversees APHIS' select agents and toxins, investigative and enforcement, biodefense, and emergency management, safety and security programs. She also chairs the Agency's Emergency Preparedness Committee and serves as APHIS' Designated Safety and Health Official promoting employee safety and health best practices.

Ms. Zimmers joined APHIS in 1999 and has held various positions within the Agency including Associate Deputy Administrator for ERCS and Deputy Director of the Emergency Management, Safety, and Security Division. She served as APHIS' first Adviser for State and Stakeholder Relations where she fostered an Agency-wide approach to engagement and launched the APHIS Customer Service Call Center in 2015. Ms. Zimmers also spent time working in congressional and media relations before becoming the Assistant Director for Public Affairs.

Ms. Zimmers holds a Bachelor of Science in Journalism from Northwestern University. In 2021, Ms. Zimmers graduated from American University's School of Public Affairs KEY Executive Leadership Program. She grew up outside of Kansas City and currently resides in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband, two sons, and their dog, Maple.

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



Ibrahim M. Shaqir was appointed Deputy Administrator of 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 to 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 United States 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.

## **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 4 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 of the program's administrative functions, including budget, fleet, purchasing, travel, and human resources, as well as National Environmental Policy Act (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, coordinating the department's continuity of operations program, overseeing 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 U.S. 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, including 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. Positions she held before her departure include both Chief of the Homeland Security Division and Acting Chief of the Continuity of Operations Division within the USDA Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Coordination. However, from August 2009 through September 2010, Ms. Fantinato 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, including 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.

Ms. Fantinato holds a bachelor's degree in biological basis of behavior and a master's degree in conservation biology, both from the University of Pennsylvania.

## **Matt Rhoads, Acting Deputy Administrator, Plant Protection and Quarantine**

## **Dr. Alan Huddleston, Acting U.S. Chief Veterinary Officer**

## **Kelly Moore, Acting Deputy Administrator, Marketing and Regulatory Programs Business Service and Chief Operating Officer, Marketing and Regulatory Programs**

## **Kent York, Acting Deputy Administrator, Policy and Program Development**

## **Sophia Kirby, Acting Director, Office of Civil Rights**

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