

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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<https://oversight.house.gov>

August 4, 2020

The Honorable Greg Ibach
Under Secretary of Marketing and Regulatory Programs
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1280 Maryland Avenue Southwest
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Under Secretary Ibach:

I write to you today to request information pertaining to your investigation of unsolicited seed packets sent from China to unwitting Americans across the country.

Americans in every single State have received unsolicited packets of seeds mailed to them from China.¹ These seed packets were sent to hundreds² of recipients entirely unsolicited and appear to have been imported into the United States in violation of various customs laws preventing importation of mislabeled or prohibited agricultural products.

In addition to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA),³ multiple State agencies have warned that these seed packets could present a threat to the local environment.⁴ Of particular concern is whether these seeds contain invasive species of plants, insects, or microbes that are designed to harm U.S. agriculture, the environment, or our economy. Such an act of intentionally introducing an invasive species, pest, or disease would be nothing less than an act of agro-terrorism.

Some have speculated that the shipments are merely a scheme to create false online product reviews. However, given the sheer number of deliveries and distribution across the

¹ *Mystery seeds from China are landing in Americans' mailboxes* (Jul. 29, 2020) CBS NEWS, available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/china-seeds-americans-mail-unsolicited/>

² Newnan, Jesse, *Americans Receive Mystery Seeds in the Mail, Mostly from China* (Jul. 28, 2020) THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/agriculture-department-states-investigate-foreign-seed-packages-11595901682>

³ *USDA Investigates Packages of Unsolicited Seeds from China* (Jul. 28, 2020), U.S. Dep't. of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, available at https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/newsroom/stakeholder-info/sa_by_date/sa-2020/sa-07/seeds-china

⁴ Griffith, Janelle, *28 States issue warnings about residents receiving unsolicited seed packets from China* (Jul. 28, 2020) NBC NEWS, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/27-states-issue-warnings-about-residents-receiving-unsolicited-seed-packets-n1235094>

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country to every State, it is essential that the investigation determine whether the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) itself is involved.

I am heartened to learn that the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is investigating these suspicious Chinese seed packets, has begun identifying the species of seeds involved, and am confident that they will get to the bottom of this matter. However, it is essential that Congress also investigate these suspicious circumstances given increasing hostility by the CCP.

Congress must determine whether legislative action is necessary in light of such large numbers of seed packets having been introduced into the customs territory of the United States without being seized at the point of inspection.

To that end, I request a staff-level briefing from USDA APHIS to update the Committee on your investigation, particularly with respect to the following questions:

1. How many unique incidents is USDA aware of in recent weeks of unsolicited seed deliveries from China disaggregated by State?
2. What is the nature and actual contents of the seed packets being delivered to unwitting citizens from China, including whether the seed packets have been found to contain invasive species or other pests?
3. What are the dangers presented to U.S. agriculture, the environment, and the economy by the infiltration of these unsolicited seed packets?
4. What has the investigation revealed with respect to who is sending these seed packets?
5. Is there evidence of involvement by the CCP to violate U.S. customs laws and harm U.S. agriculture by importing harmful organisms or noxious weeds by means of these seed packet deliveries?
6. Why have U.S. authorities been unable to identify and seize these seed packet shipments during inspection before they are permitted to enter U.S. customs territory and are delivered to unwitting citizens?
7. What resources or legislative measures are necessary to ensure that these unsolicited seed packets are seized during inspection before being permitted to enter U.S. customs territory?
8. How is USDA APHIS working with State agencies across the country to ensure public awareness of these unsolicited seed packets and coordinate the investigation?

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This briefing may be conducted remotely for convenience and safety issues. To schedule the briefing or ask any follow-up or related questions, please contact Committee on Oversight and Reform staff at (202) 225-5074.

The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. Thank you in advance for your cooperation with this inquiry.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James Comer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "J".

James Comer
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Reform

cc: The Honorable Carolyn B. Maloney, Chairwoman
Committee on Oversight and Reform