



STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

**Submitted to the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture
Biotechnology, Horticulture, and Research Subcommittee**

**“Examining the Impacts of Relocating USDA Research Agencies on Agriculture Research”
June 5, 2019
1300 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C.**

Chairwoman Plaskett, Ranking Member Dunn, and members of the committee:

Thank you for holding a hearing to examine the impacts on agriculture research that will result from relocating the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS) and National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). NFU opposes USDA's proposed relocation of ERS and NIFA, and its planned reorganization of ERS.

National Farmers Union (NFU) represents approximately 200,000 family farmers, ranchers and rural residents, and works to protect and enhance the economic well-being and quality of life for family farmers and ranchers and rural communities across the country. NFU first adopted a position against the proposal and sent a letter to Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue in September 2018 articulating our concerns. NFU remains troubled by the proposed relocation and reorganization because the process has lacked meaningful public input, the proposed changes may diminish the objectivity of each agency, and the proposal devalues public agriculture research.

NFU's Policy and Background Information

NFU is a strong supporter of public agriculture research that is unbiased, data-driven, and free from political influence. Our member-driven policy "supports increased funding for public agricultural research" and notes that reductions in state and federal funding for agriculture research and the "increase in private research has reduced the sharing of information and increases costs of production inputs."¹

ERS and NIFA are integral to our public agricultural research system and play major roles in helping farmers and ranchers improve productivity, natural resource stewardship, and access global markets. In the face of great economic and environmental challenges, the work of these agencies in helping family farmers and ranchers succeed is critical. Moreover, the USDA Research, Education, and Economics (REE) mission area invests approximately \$3 billion² annually in publicly funded food and agriculture research, including through ERS and NIFA, which benefits millions of people across the country. Thus, any changes made to these agencies has far-reaching consequences.

A process without strong public input or justification

The process to relocate these agencies has lacked meaningful public input that would better inform decision-making. The proposal was developed without stakeholder input or a cost-benefit analysis. Additionally, to-date, USDA has not been forthcoming and transparent with all of the metrics it has used to develop and carry out its proposal.

¹ National Farmers Union. *Policy of the National Farmers Union*. March 2019.

² Jim Monke. Congressional Research Service (CRS). "Agricultural Research: Background and Issues." October 6, 2016.

The proposal does not adequately address how USDA will improve the agencies' effectiveness in serving family farmers and ranchers through the relocation process. In USDA's initial announcement of its intention to relocate the agencies, it cited difficulty recruiting employees to the Washington, DC area due to high cost of living and long commutes.³ However, no strong evidence has been provided for these recruitment challenges, and to date the relocation process has resulted in significant loss of knowledgeable and experienced staff. Ultimately, this loss of staff may lead to disruptions in NIFA's grant and program delivery and ERS's research, analysis, and reporting. Disruptions to the functioning of these agencies could have significant detrimental impact on family farmers and ranchers.

A threat to independent, science-based research

We are also deeply concerned that the relocation and reorganization will jeopardize each agency's objectivity. In addition to the relocation plans, USDA intends to move ERS from the REE mission area and place it under the Office of the Chief Economist (OCE). The Chief Economist's role is to advise the Secretary on the economic impact of USDA's policies and programs, while the office of the Under Secretary for REE and the Chief Scientist are explicitly charged with upholding scientific integrity.⁴ Given that ERS's mission is to conduct "objective economic research" for the benefit of the public, placing ERS directly under the Chief Economist's purview may diminish the scientific integrity and objectivity of the agency's research and analysis. Relocating NIFA at or near entities applying for grants may also create conflicts of interest in the grant awarding process.

Devaluing public agriculture research

Physically locating ERS and NIFA away from the Washington, DC area could significantly reduce the access important decision makers have to these agencies, thus diminishing the importance and influence of these agencies and their work. The President's own FY2020 Budget Proposal clearly states that ERS's "key clientele includes White House and USDA policy officials; program administrators/managers; the U.S. Congress; other Federal agencies; State and local government officials; and organizations, including farm and industry groups interested in public policy issues." Since the majority of these stakeholders are located in Washington, DC, the proposed relocation would serve to diminish agency effectiveness and cross-collaboration.

Also troubling is that the President's FY2020 budget request, which includes the directive to relocate ERS and NIFA and reorganize ERS, also includes a discontinuation of research at ERS that is vital to farmers, ranchers and rural communities. In particular, the budget request states that "ERS will discontinue research relative to farm, conservation and trade policy, and on investments in agricultural

³ USDA. "USDA to Realign ERS with Chief Economist, Relocate ERS & NIFA Outside DC." August 9, 2018. <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2018/08/09/usda-realign-ers-chief-economist-relocate-ers-nifa-outside-dc>

⁴ Code of Federal Regulations, Title 7 – Agriculture, Sec. 2.69. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CFR-2018-title7-vol1/xml/CFR-2018-title7-vol1-part2.xml#seqnum2.21>

research and development.”⁵ Also proposed is the elimination of research and extramural agreements such as drought resilience, new energy sources, local and regional food markets, beginning farmers and ranchers, invasive species, markets for environmental services, and on food safety. Food and nutrition issues and all research and statistics related to the rural economy are also proposed for removal from ERS’s purview.

Conclusion

We thank the committee again for the opportunity to submit testimony. We believe the proposal and process to-date is broadly detrimental to family farmers, ranchers, and rural communities, and we oppose the relocation of ERS and NIFA and the reorganization of ERS. NFU stands ready to provide any additional support or information the committee may need in evaluating and considering USDA’s proposal and process to-date.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Roger Johnson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Roger" being more prominent than the last name "Johnson".

Roger Johnson,
President

⁵ USDA. “2020 Budget: Explanatory Notes for Committee on Appropriations, Volume 1.” Page 16-6.
<https://www.obpa.usda.gov/USDA2020CJ.pdf>