



**Oral Comments for USDA Listening Session
Research, Education, Extension
Presented by Nichelle Harriott, Policy Specialist
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My name is Nichelle Harriott, Policy Specialist at the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. Thank you for the opportunity to represent our comments to the mission area on the 2018 Farm Bill and its implementation. NSAC worked with a range of stakeholders, including researchers and farmers, to ensure that the Farm Bill provided funding for agriculture research, supported sustainable farming systems and organic, beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers, and provided farmers with the tools needed to be successful and competitive in a changing agricultural economy.

The 2018 Farm Bill saw a lot of gains for REE including, for the first time, increased mandatory funding for NIFA programs that are vital to supporting organic research and farmers, and permanent funding for beginning farmer training. We are excited to continue dialogue with the agency on making sure these programs are accessible and serve the farming community, helping them be competitive and resilient in a changing world. The following are specific recommendations we will be following up with the agency on:

Agriculture Research

First, we would like to formally express our concerns about the proposed relocation of ERS and NIFA and the reorganization of ERS. NSAC strongly believes that uprooting the agencies will serve to sever key partnerships with other federal research agencies and stakeholders. There is also the likely loss of highly experienced and educated staff who will not be able to move with the agencies, as well as Congress' reduced ability to oversee the agencies from a distance. Further, relocating the agencies will undermine USDA funding of research. Therefore, **we urge the agency to reconsider its plans for relocation and reorganization.**

This Farm Bill establishes a new research priority for AFRI by supporting research that focuses on soil health and its importance for increased productivity and resiliency on fields across the U.S. While we welcome this new and important addition for research funding, **we urge AFRI to include and strengthen emphasis on research, education, and extension that supports sustainable farming systems throughout all its programs.** We also wish to see more devoted and distinct funding be made available for public cultivar development and much longer-term funding for projects that undertake this research.

We also request the agency consider including a stronger focus on climate adaptation and mitigation strategies and tools to help farmers get ready for and become resilient to changing climate and growing conditions. We urge the agency to **clarify grant eligibility criteria to ensure that each AFRI RFA, including integrated programs, are fully competitive and open to all eligible applicants – including academic, private, non-profit and government researchers.**

The Farm Bill adds new language for the National Genetics Resources Program and Advisory Council on data reporting and metrics regarding the state of plant breeding in the U.S. ARS has a unique role in spearheading this area of research, ensuring farmers have to right tools at their disposal that support sustainable, resilient agricultural systems. To this end, **we recommend the agency finalize their plan and timeline for completing this analysis and making it available to the public.**

Second, I'll like to highlight the importance of OREI to the broader organic community and stress how critical this program is in providing organic farmers new tools and strategies to remain competitive in the organic market. The 2018 Farm Bill doubles the funding capability of OREI over the next five years. It is therefore important the agency **develop a comprehensive plan outlining how these new funds will be spent, and which research priorities will be included or expanded, in addition to soil health.** Research that identifies marketing, policy and socioeconomic constraints to the expansion of organic in the U.S. are also important areas that require additional research.

Food Safety

Third, there are many changes that have been made to the Food Safety Outreach Program. **We encourage the agency to include all of these changes in the FY19 RFA,** which includes the repeal of the match requirement, the repeal of the limitation on grant funds prohibiting an entity from receiving funding after three years, and the prioritization of projects that focus on beginning, socially disadvantaged, and veteran farmers.

Beginning and Socially Disadvantaged Farmers

One of the most significant changes in the Farm Bill is the establishment of the Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach (FOTO) program, a new umbrella program designed to coordinate USDA training and outreach to beginning, veteran, and socially disadvantaged farmers. We urge the agency **to release the FY19 RFA for BFRDP as soon as possible and to allow at least a 60-day application window to ensure applicants, especially community-based organizations with limited capacity, have sufficient time to prepare and submit grant applications.**

More clarity and guidance should be provided in the peer review process and to evaluate recommended proposals closely to ensure priority is being given to partnerships led by non-profit and community-based organizations. Finally, the agency must better track and evaluate partnerships with NGOs and CBOs and report this information in a consistent way – either through the CRIS database or annual reports on grantees.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our recommendations, and in follow up we will be submitting more detailed comments to the federal register on these issues.