



**Written Statement on Examining the Impacts of Relocating
USDA Research Agencies on Agriculture Research
Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, and Research
U.S. House of Representatives
June 5, 2019**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these remarks on behalf of our member organizations across the country. The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) is a strong supporter of the U.S Department of Agriculture's (USDA) research mission area. This testimony reflects our concern regarding the proposed relocation of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and the reorganization and relocation of the Economic Research Service (ERS). Our concerns are shared with numerous stakeholders within the scientific and agricultural community. We believe the proposal to relocate these federal agencies outside the National Capital Region will have detrimental effects on the agencies' function and threaten the future viability of American farmers and rural communities.

Research, education, and extension are vital to our nation's agricultural economy. The investments made through USDA's REE mission area are essential for American farmers, trade, nutrition, innovation, and our country's continued competitiveness on the global stage. After stagnating for decades, funding of public agricultural research has slowly increased over the past few years, with many significant improvements made in the recent farm bill. For example, the 2018 Farm Bill scales up investments in agriculture research and education by providing \$630 million in new grant funding to several NIFA programs that are key to solving the challenges facing the next generation. We believe these gains made in recent years are at risk of being undermined by the impending relocation of ERS and NIFA – two agencies with oversight over agriculture research and charting the course for American agriculture. This is further exemplified by the seven percent decrease in research funding proposed in the President's FY 2020 budget. Cuts like those proposed, the exclusion of important stakeholders from decision-making processes that impact them, as well as the demoralization of talented staff serving these institutions do not support USDA's mission or the nation's ability to remain a leader in agriculture production.

Of primary concern is the realignment and relocation of ERS. The physical and administrative moving of ERS is not neutral, but a clear attempt to shrink the quality and quantity of economic research conducted by USDA and politicize federal agricultural research by moving ERS under the Office of the Chief Economist (OCE) within the Office of the Secretary. Realigning ERS within OCE would shift the agency's nonpartisan focus on providing broad analysis of the economics of food and agricultural policy to the decidedly more political mission of providing backing for Administration proposals. In the process, both the integrity and the comprehensive nature of ERS research could become compromised, not to mention cuts to important economic analysis around nutrition, climate, and the farm economy.

Similarly, concerns over the relocation of NIFA include eroding the agency's role in bringing science to the forefront of new innovation and development of practices and tools for our nation's farmers. NIFA's success in driving agricultural research has had direct impacts on family farms, crop and livestock production, conservation, climate mitigation, local food systems, organic and sustainable agriculture practices, as well as underserved farmers, specialty crops and pest management research. Advances in these fields have helped next generation scientists and farmers discover new improvements for our agricultural system that boosts productivity, profitability, rural economy, and human health.

Removing ERS and NIFA from the National Capital Region has already led to a massive exodus of highly-trained experts unable to make the move and threatens to sever key partnerships and collaborations in the nation's capital. Thus far, there has been no defensible or economic justification provided as to why ERS and NIFA should be uprooted, and no proof that relocation or restructuring would yield economic or research benefits. The ramifications from USDA's proposal – which has moved forward without a cost-benefit analysis, public input from stakeholders, or transparent federal oversight – will, in our belief, undermine the scientific integrity of the agricultural and economic research undertaken by the agencies. This will undoubtedly impact farmers, consumers, and trade – at a time American farmers can ill-afford.

Opposition to the move continues to grow, and includes former USDA Chief Scientists and Undersecretaries who served under both Democratic and Republican administrations, university deans, as well as over 1,000 individual scientists, and scores of concerned scientific societies, agriculture, and statistical associations. According to a letter¹ penned by former USDA scientists, undersecretaries, and vice-presidents and deans at land-grant universities, the proposed move of ERS and NIFA is one that will “undermine our food and agriculture enterprise by disrupting and hampering the agencies' vital work.” Without physical proximity, cultivated partnerships with the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, and the Department of Energy, for instance, stand to be hampered by relocation, putting pioneering research at risk. Collaborations that could be affected include research involving the sequencing of genomes of economically important plants which has led to improved bean, potato and wheat cultivars, and the education of undergraduate and graduate students in the field of plant breeding. Currently, the Office of the Inspector General is reviewing the legality of actions taken by USDA, given the lack of transparency and apparent circumvention of federal guidelines and procedure.

Congress has echoed the concerns of stakeholders, with bills introduced in both chambers that would halt USDA's relocation plans. The *Agriculture Research Integrity Act of 2019* (H.R. 1221, S. 1637), sends a clear message that the relocation of two important federal agencies out of the Washington Capital Region is not in the best interest of our nation's farmers, but rather threatens the integrity and political independence of agriculture research and policy analysis. Similarly, the final funding legislation approved by Congress for FY 2019 reiterates concern and opposition to the move and instructs USDA to submit a cost-benefit analysis prior to moving forward with the relocation, which the Administration has yet to present.

NSAC is deeply troubled by the unilateral decision to uproot these core scientific agencies, as well as the myriad negative ramifications to agriculture and our country that will result from this relocation.

¹ <https://www.amstat.org/asa/files/pdfs/BuchananWotekiBlueRibbonPanel.pdf>

We support this Committee's efforts to raise concern about the impending move and applaud your colleagues on the Committee on Appropriations that just this week sent a FY 2020 funding bill to the floor that would prohibit the use of USDA funding to relocate ERS and NIFA. Instead of undermining years of collaboration and progress around agricultural research, the Agency should be bringing stakeholders together, including universities that lead much of this work, to chart a new course to increase investments in agriculture research in order to best support American farmers in confronting future challenges. Unfortunately, the Administration has thus far shown it intends to take the opposite approach and has indicated no plans to halt or delay the relocation, blatantly ignoring the concerns expressed by both stakeholders and Congress.

We urge Congress to fulfill its essential role in providing the proper oversight on the Executive Branch and would encourage Members of this committee to ensure the language advanced by the House Appropriations Committee this week succeeds into the final spending bill and take strong and decisive action against moving this proposal forward.

We thank you for considering our views and for your continued support of nation's farmers and the agricultural research that underpins their success.



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