



September 24, 2010

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

At the annual summer meeting of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition our member organizations from around the country had a detailed discussion about progress to date and the future direction of the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI). The members adopted the following consensus points and asked that we share these recommendations with you and with your senior staff and with senior REE and NIFA staff.

It is my pleasure to forward their recommendations to you. I will be happy to try to answer any questions or provide any additional information that might be helpful.

Sincerely,

Ferd Hoefner
Policy Director
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

NSAC Resolution:
Recommendations in Support of the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative
Adopted at 2010 Annual Summer Meeting

1. AFRI should more strongly support Departmental goals with respect to rural economic and regional innovation and renewal and to 'know your farmer, know your food' regional food systems regeneration. It is doing so now, in small ways, but not in our view on a scale commensurate with the Secretary's well-articulated goals on these two critical macro public issues. The FY 11 RFA should ramp up significantly the topic areas and funding for these priority concerns.
2. On a related note, it follows that project review panels should be in sync with those goals and objectives. Hence, the panels need increased representation from individuals with substantial knowledge and experience in these areas, including rural development and entrepreneurship and food systems.
3. If we are to really achieve goals of sustainability and of strong local and regional food and farming systems, there needs to be a stronger AFRI commitment to public classical plant and animal breeding, including the introduction of public cultivars. Following the experience of this

past year's RFA and funding round, it is increasingly clear to us this needs to be its own program and not buried as an add-on to other programs that have different goals and objectives.

4. The "foundational" programs as they were called in this past year's RFA need to come into compliance with the statutory emphasis on integrated research, education, and extension projects. In the last RFA, all foundational programs were restricted to research-only. This is contrary to law and to sound policy. Whether or not a particular funding area is integrated or not integrated should be determined on a case by case basis, not by a sweeping and inappropriate across-the-board demarcation.
5. AFRI needs to be restored to being a fully competitive program. The current restriction limiting access to the "great challenges" projects to universities only is not supported by the statute and is not in keeping with AFRI as the major competitive grants program at NIFA. We believe the decision to make AFRI a not fully-competitive program is wrong and contrary to all but the most contorted reading of the law. This is really quite simple - competitive programs should be competitive.
6. While we support the idea of including mega projects in particular grant categories on an experimental basis to see if that approach can kick start some major advances, we believe there needs to be more room in the next RFA for smaller-sized grants as well. Diversity, an important agricultural and ecological principle, is a sound programmatic idea as well.
7. On a related note, steps need to be taken to make the proposal writing process less complex. Needing as many as 300 pages for a complete proposal is in our view extreme. Anything that can be done to reduce paperwork requirements should be considered.
8. Last but not least, a stronger emphasis on sustainable systems work is still needed. In our view both words – sustainable and systems – are important. There is no doubt a place for systems work for projects designed to help mitigate the many acute problems in our current broken food and farm system, but the case is even stronger for systems work to help create a more sustainable system than what we have now. System-based solutions for the grand challenges and for the foundational challenges are critical. The language of the RFA and the tools used in the evaluation process should encourage and prioritize projects that contribute to game changing, long term alternatives and solutions.