

March 20, 2012

The Honorable Herb Kohl
Chairman, Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration
Appropriations Subcommittee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Ranking Member, Agriculture, Rural
Development, Food and Drug
Administration Appropriations
Subcommittee
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Dear Chairman Kohl and Ranking Member Blunt

We are writing you to encourage your support for the statistical agencies within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for FY 2013. The Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Agriculture Statistics Service (NASS) produce vital information that plays an essential role in feeding the nation, revitalizing rural America, and increasing our competitiveness internationally. We urge that these agencies be funded at their FY13 request levels (\$77 million for ERS and \$179 million for NASS.)

The ERS provides economic and other social science information and analysis on agriculture, food, the environment, and rural development. ERS produces such information and analyses to inform policy and program decisions made across the spectrum of USDA missions, and supplies them in outlets that are accessible to USDA stakeholders and the general public. We encourage you to support the USDA ERS at a strong and sound level. USDA and its customers greatly benefit from their analysis as it informs how programs are designed for cost efficiencies and greater effectiveness.

Already viewed as a definitive source of information on farm and rural economy, agricultural trade, and food choices, ERS is experiencing increased demand for its products and services. Examples of the valuable information provided by ERS include analysis of food consumption factors, such as store/restaurant proximity, food prices, food and nutrition assistance programs, and community characteristics. This information provides insights into diet quality and a community's ability to access healthy food. They also have the only source of data on food availability which measures the national food supply. ERS and NASS jointly sponsor the Agriculture Research Management Survey database, which is the only national survey that provides observations of field-level farm practices, the economics of the farm business, and the characteristics of the American farm household. Between 2010 and 2012 the ERS budget was cut by 4.8%. Further decreases would reduce their ability to provide analysis of key issues valued by customers, including the estimation of farm income by region and farm type and analysis of consumer food choices. Losing this kind of information could be devastating to future analysis and understanding of how our citizens produce, sell and consume the most fundamental of resources, our food.

NASS provides timely, accurate, and informative statistics in service to U.S. agriculture. NASS statistics provide the information necessary to keep agricultural markets stable and efficient and to help maintain a consistency for all users of agricultural statistics. In addition to other projects, the agency conducts the quinquennial U.S. Census of Agriculture. Indeed, the requested increase of \$21 million for NASS is to carry out the 2012 Census. The value of information from the Census to your work can be seen by viewing the statistical data from the last Census of Agriculture, which is available at the State and Congressional District level. Other information includes the average value of agricultural products sold per farm in each state, and the percentage increase/decrease of farms in your state. NASS also provides information such as cropland data and crop-specific images for state and national interest.

We understand that these are difficult economic times and that you face difficult decisions as you allocate money for discretionary programs at USDA. However, statistical information is a vital component in assuring that USDA continues to meet our agricultural needs in feeding Americans, revitalizing rural America, and competing abroad. We urge you to support these two statistical agencies as you consider FY 2013 appropriations.

Please direct any questions on this letter to Steve Pierson, Director of Science Policy for the American Statistical Association: pierson@amstat.org; 703.302.1841. If you have any specific questions with regard to agricultural products in your state, please contact any of our organizations, ERS or NASS.

American Society of Agronomy
American Sociological Association
American Statistical Association
Association for University Business and Economic Research
Association of Academic Survey Research Organizations
Association of Public Data Users
Consortium of Social Science Associations
Council for Community and Economic Research
Council on Food, Agricultural, and Resource Economics
Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics
Crop Science Society of America
Soil Science Society of America
Southern Agricultural Economics Association
Rural Sociological Society

Cc: Members of the Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration
Appropriations Subcommittee