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Congress Seeks Answers to USDA's Agencies Move

"It is critical that the USDA respond promptly to congressional questions about its plans to relocate two important agencies," said American Statistical Association (ASA) President Lisa LaVange, referring to recent letters sent by members of Congress to Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue over plans by the USDA to relocate and reorganize the Economic Research Service (ERS) and National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). "The USDA seemingly made this decision without consulting Congress or the USDA's partners and stakeholders," LaVange continued. "And now it's trying to rush through the move. America—not least America's producers and rural community—need to understand what is going on, why and what impact this will have on America's food, agriculture and the rural economy."

Both Sen. Pat Roberts and Sen. Debbie Stabenow—chair and ranking members, respectively, of the US Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry—[wrote](#) to Perdue September 7 pointing out that the "agencies play a critical role in advancing agricultural research and analysis on topics such as food and nutrition, food safety, global markets and trade, resources and environment and the rural and agricultural economy." Roberts and Stabenow asked for responses to 12 detailed questions.

Additionally, House of Representative agriculture appropriators sent a [letter](#) August 30 to the USDA. Ranking Member Sanford D. Bishop Jr., Rep. Rosa DeLauro, Rep. Chellie Pingree and Rep. Mark Pocan expressed their concerns about the move, noting that farmers and consumers in their districts benefit daily from the work of ERS and NIFA. These agencies, they said, enjoy a "worldwide reputation for identifying our most pressing agricultural issues and advancing innovative solutions to address those issues."

House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer also [expressed his "strong opposition"](#) to the move. On September 4, he said, "The proposal raises serious concerns that the quality of work being done at ERS and NIFA may well be undermined." On the same day, Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton [called](#) for the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and Agriculture Committee to hold a joint hearing on the proposal. She also called on appropriators to prohibit the USDA from carrying out the move in its FY19 spending bill.

LaVange praised the eight US senators and representatives who have so far spoken up. “I thank these congressional leaders for speaking up on this illogical and counterproductive move. It is imperative that ERS and NIFA be maintained as strong and independent agencies to support our \$1 trillion food, agriculture and rural economy,” she said. “I don’t see how this happens if the agencies are moved out of DC and ERS is reorganized into to the policy-supporting arm of USDA.”

ASA Executive Director Ron Wasserstein highlighted the bipartisan concern over the USDA plan and called on more in Congress to investigate the relocation and realignment. “I especially commend Sen. Roberts and Sen. Stabenow for the bipartisan execution of their committee responsibilities for our nation’s agriculture and rural economy and I ask the leadership of other committees with USDA responsibilities to do the same.”

Noting the newly released [USDA data on attrition rates](#), Wasserstein added, “It’s all the more incumbent upon Congress to oppose the USDA ERS and NIFA move given that new data both undermine the USDA’s justification for relocation and demonstrate why the ERS should not be placed under the chief economist.” He continued, “The USDA claimed that recruitment challenges in the Washington, DC, area justify the move—but do not provide any evidence that moving to other localities will solve this problem. The USDA also claimed that the ERS should be closer to farmers, even though the primary audience for its research is other USDA program agencies and congressional and administration policy officials.”

“For the sake of good government,” LaVange concluded, “USDA should not be allowed to proceed with their plans for ERS and NIFA until Congress has received USDA’s responses and we have a better understanding of the problem the USDA is addressing and the ramifications of its plan. A study by an independent entity like the Government Accountability Office—examining both the justification for the changes proposed and the budget and personnel issues raised by USDA—would provide Congress the answers currently lacking.”

USDA partners and stakeholders have been especially vocal in their questioning, concern and opposition to the USDA proposal. More than [100 organizations signed a letter](#) to Perdue urging he delay the process for the proposed relocation of NIFA. The Applied and Agricultural Economics Association sent Congress [a letter signed by academic deans, university departments and professional associations](#)—including the ASA—requesting that ERS research capacity and quality be maintained. The Friends of Agricultural Statistics and Analysis sent Congress a [letter signed by 48 organizations](#) opposing the relocation of ERS and its reorganization into an office tasked with supporting USDA policy. These groups have also organized a [September 20 webinar featuring USDA chief scientists](#) from the administrations of President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama—Gale Buchanan and Cathie Woteki—as well as Susan Offutt, an ERS administrator under President Bill Clinton and Bush. More than 25 organizations are sponsoring the webinar, which is open to everyone to view ([registration](#) is required.)

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See also September 6, 2018, press release, [Penny-Wise, Dollar-Foolish Move at USDA Amounts to Big American Food and Agriculture Loss](#), and September 13 press release, [New USDA Personnel Data Spurs ASA to Reiterate Call for Congress to Block USDA Move](#).

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About the American Statistical Association

The ASA is the world's largest community of statisticians and the oldest continuously operating professional science society in the United States. Its members serve in industry, government and academia in more than 90 countries, advancing research and promoting sound statistical practice to inform public policy and improve human welfare. For additional information, please visit the ASA website at www.amstat.org.

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