

December 12, 2018<sup>1</sup>

The Honorable K. Michael Conaway  
Chair, Committee on Agriculture  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Collin Peterson  
Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Pat Roberts  
Chair, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,  
and Forestry  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow  
Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture,  
Nutrition, and Forestry  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairs Roberts and Conaway and Ranking Members Stabenow and Peterson,

We write to express our profound concern for USDA’s plan to relocate the Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) outside of Washington, DC and to realign ERS out of the USDA Research, Education, and Economics (REE) mission area. We believe the restructuring will undermine our food and agriculture enterprise by disrupting and hampering the agencies’ vital work in support of it—through research, analyses, and statistics. We are also deeply troubled such a major upheaval of the USDA research arm would be carried out with such haste and without the input and prior consultation of the USDA research stakeholders.

In the best interests of American agricultural, food, and rural sectors, we respectfully request that you intervene to stop the restructuring of REE at least until there has been a comprehensive independent study and full consultation with the stakeholder community.

We write from the perspective of current and former university agricultural administration leaders and former USDA chief scientists. Our positions in land grant universities (LGUs) as well as our broader experience and leadership in food and agriculture provide us a unique and important perspective on the US food and agriculture enterprise. LGUs and the broader academic network work hand in hand with the USDA to identify priorities, carry out research and analysis, and disseminate results to the broader community. An integral part of USDA’s support for our food and agriculture enterprise along with ERS, NIFA takes an integrated approach to support programs to find innovative solutions to the most pressing local and global problems to ensure the long-term viability of agriculture.<sup>2</sup> The mission of ERS complements that of NIFA by anticipating “trends and emerging issues in agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America

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<sup>1</sup> This letter was originally sent November 27 with 21 signers. It is being updated as additional signers are added.

<sup>2</sup> <https://nifa.usda.gov/about-nifa>

and to conduct high-quality, objective economic research to inform and enhance public and private decision making.”<sup>3</sup>

Through the partnership of LGUs, USDA, other federal research funding agencies, and the private sector, agricultural research has increased many-fold the productivity of our farms and farmers, despite the continual challenges of disease, pests, extreme weather, and invasive species. The progress and accomplishment are by design, through the leadership and vision of many in the USDA, LGUs, and larger private-sector community over the past many decades.

The engagement of the broader scientific funding research community—the National Science Foundation (NSF), the USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and many more—has also been integral to the impressive progress. For example, NIFA partnered with NSF, NIH, and the Department of Energy to launch the Plant Genome Initiative. This initiative has sequenced the genomes of economically important plants and led to improved bean, potato, tomato, wheat and barley cultivars while at the same time training thousands of undergraduate and graduate students who will be the next generation plant scientists and breeders.

To further exemplify the advances that have come from multi-agency involvement, consider the Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome (PRRS) virus, which was first detected in the U.S. in 1987 and that costs North American farmers more than \$660 million annually. A collaborative effort between land-grant universities and the private sector supported by NIFA and NSF has resulted in the breeding of pigs that are not harmed by the disease. Another example is a university-ARS collaboration supported by USDA-ARS, NIFA, and other federal funding agencies to create soybean oil with no trans fats.

The advances that have occurred because of the close collaboration of numerous research funding agencies have been greatly facilitated by their proximity. This is because of the close collaboration that must occur between the agencies, researchers, and university leaders like ourselves. University agricultural leaders and researchers make regular visits to Washington, DC to meet with USDA offices, research funding agencies, our congressional delegations, and other farm and research organizations based or meeting in Washington. Locating NIFA outside the Washington, DC area will hamper our work and the effective integration of NIFA with other research agencies and stakeholders.

Such integrative science is essential for meeting the challenges of the next 50 years. For example, NIFA is currently partnering with NSF on an Initiative at the Nexus of Food, Energy and Water Systems to significantly advance our understanding of how these three interrelated systems interact and function with the objective of increasing their resilience and ensuring long-term sustainability.

We are also concerned the relocation of NIFA will undermine USDA funding of research, which has stagnated for the last 40 years. Since 1976, it has lost two thirds of its purchasing power.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/about-ers/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/s3fs-public/TotRes%253B.xlsx>

With NIFA being relocated outside of Washington, we worry it will become less relevant and therefore more susceptible to further degradation of its budget.

In addition, the relocations are likely to weaken the coordination of NIFA and ERS with their sister REE agencies, the ARS and the National Agricultural Statistics Service. This would set back the work of Congress over several farm bills and appropriations bills to ensure more coordination and integration between the agencies. Equally important, it will remove ERS and NIFA from the important role of bringing science to bear on the work of the USDA frontline program agencies, all of which will also remain in Washington. Separating the agencies between a new location and Washington, DC, with leadership and some staff of each agency being kept close to USDA headquarters, could also undermine the respective internal operations and coordination.

For the ERS specifically, we believe the relocation will set back the agency for 5-10 years and undermine its independence as a federal statistical agency. In a major relocation, there will be substantial staff loss because of either an unwillingness or other preventing circumstances to move. Given the ERS's highly specialized work, it will be a long process to replace the loss of experience and expertise. We also believe ERS's work is served well in DC where its many of its primary audiences, partners, and collaborators are located.

ERS also thrives both in its independence and its work in REE thanks to the leadership of the USDA chief scientist and the synergies it enjoys with the other REE agencies. Congress was wise in placing ERS within REE, and it would be most unfortunate to allow that deliberative choice to be undone by administrative fiat.

Given the decades of planning and adjustments to optimize the work of REE, we are troubled the USDA seeks to dismantle the research arm in such a major way in a matter of months without a confirmed chief scientist, consultation of current or former REE, NIFA, and ERS leaders, prior engagement and input of the greater research community, and other good-government procedures. Indeed, there seems to be little evidence of any planning or study before the announcement to make the relocation.

Making changes in a successful enterprise should be based on two criteria: (i) to fix a real problem that jeopardizes future success; or (ii) to ensure further improvements for the system. The ERS-NIFA moves satisfy neither. In addition, stakeholders have been waiting for a cost-benefit analysis of the proposal to be presented and an explanation of how this move relates to REE's existing long-term strategic plan. For these reasons, it is premature to allow any final action to be taken in the absence of basic good government practice.

In closing, as leaders in the USDA agricultural research partnership committee, we have deep concerns about USDA's upheaval of its research mission area without broader consultation. The Research, Education, and Economics mission reached its current make-up following years of planning, adjustments, and optimization informed by consultation, study, and public comment. We see no justification that it should be restructured on such a large scale on USDA's short timeline and without proper study.


We urge you to intervene to ensure the integrity of our food and agriculture enterprise over the next 50 years.

Sincerely,



Gale Buchanan

Former USDA Chief Scientist and Under Secretary of Agriculture for Research, Education & Economics; Dean and Director Emeritus, University of Georgia, College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences



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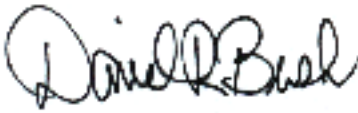
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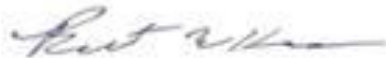
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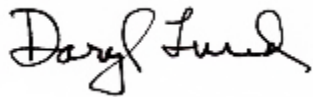
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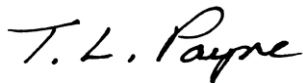
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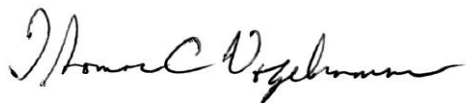
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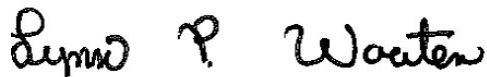
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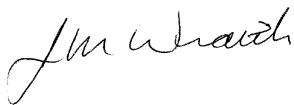
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