December 14, 2018

The Honorable Robert Aderholt  
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on  
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food  
and Drug Administration, and Related  
Agencies  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Hoeven  
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on  
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food  
and Drug Administration, and Related  
Agencies  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Sanford Bishop  
Ranking Member, Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural  
Development, Food and Drug  
Administration, and Related Agencies  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jeff Merkley  
Ranking Member, Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural  
Development, Food and Drug  
Administration, and Related Agencies  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairs Hoeven and Aderholt and Ranking Members Bishop and Merkley,

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

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1 This letter was originally sent November 27 with 21 signers. It is being updated as additional signers are added. The current count is 81. Note also an identical version of this letter has been sent to authorizers.
the long-term viability of agriculture. The mission of ERS complements that of NIFA by anticipating “trends and emerging issues in agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America and to conduct high-quality, objective economic research to inform and enhance public and private decision making.”

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.

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2 https://nifa.usda.gov/about-nifa
3 https://www.ers.usda.gov/about-ers/
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.\(^4\) 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.\(^4\)

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

Catherine E. Woteki
Former USDA Chief Scientist and Under Secretary of Agriculture for Research, Education & Economics

Roger Beachy
Former USDA Chief Scientist and Director of National Institute of Food and Agriculture

Sonny Ramaswamy
Former Director of National Institute of Food and Agriculture

David Ackerly
Dean, College of Natural Resources, University of California, Berkeley

Theodore G. Andreadis
Director, The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station
Agriculture, Community and Natural Resources Division (Land Grant Program), American Samoa Community College

Dan Arp
Dean Emeritus, College of Agricultural Sciences, Oregon State University

Ken Blemings
Interim Dean, Davis College of Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Design, West Virginia University

Kathryn J. Boor
Robert P. Lynch Dean, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, Cornell University

Charles Boyer
Vice President for Agriculture, Dean, and Director, Montana State University College of Agriculture

Douglas D. Buhler
Director, MSU AgBioResearch & Assistant Vice President for Research and Innovation, Michigan State University

Daniel Bush
Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs, Colorado State University
Neville Clarke
Director Emeritus, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Directors; Former Executive Director, Southern Association of State Agricultural Experiment Station Directors; Chair, Experiment Station Committee on Organization and Policy (ESCOP)

Mark J. Cochran
Vice President for Agriculture, University of Arkansas System

Nicholas Comerford
Dean and Director for Research and Cooperative Extension, College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

Nancy M. Cox
Dean, College of Agriculture, Food and Environment, University of Kentucky

Gerard D’Souza
Dean and Director of Land Grant Programs, Prairie View A&M University

Helene Dillard
Dean and Professor, College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, University of California, Davis

Dan Dooley
Former Vice President, Agriculture and Natural Resources; Former Senior Vice President for External Relations, University of California

Robert Easter
President Emeritus; Dean Emeritus College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois
Cameron Faustman  
Former Interim Dean, College of Agriculture, Health and Natural Resources, University of Connecticut

John D. Floros  
President, New Mexico State University

Robert Godfrey  
Director, Agricultural Experiment Station, University of the Virgin Islands

Robert M. Goodman  
Executive Dean, School of Biological and Environmental Sciences, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Alan L. Grant  
Dean, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Virginia Tech

Jim Hanson  
Associate Dean and Associate Director, University of Maryland Extension

Ronald Hendrick  
Dean, College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Michigan State University

Bret W. Hess  
Interim Dean, College of Agriculture and Natural Resources; Director, Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station, University of Wyoming
Walter A. Hill  
Vice Provost, Dean, College of Agriculture, Environment and Nutrition Sciences, Research Director and Extension Administrator, Tuskegee University

Glenda Humiston  
Vice President, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Director of the Agricultural Experiment Station, Director of Cooperative Extension, University of California

Jody Jellison  
Director, UMass Extension; Director, Massachusetts Agricultural Experiment Station; Assistant Vice Chancellor, Agricultural Research and Engagement, University of Massachusetts

Moses T. Kairo, Dean, School of Agricultural and Natural Sciences, University of Maryland Eastern Shore

Govind Kannan  
Former Dean, College of Agriculture, Family Sciences and Technology, Fort Valley State University

John Killefer, South Dakota Corn Endowed Dean, College of Agriculture, Food & Environmental Sciences, South Dakota State University

John Kirby  
Dean, College of the Environment and Life Sciences and Director, Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension, University of Rhode Island
Cathann A. Kress  
Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Dean, College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences, The Ohio State University

Michael D. Lairmore DVM, PhD  
Dean and Distinguished Professor, School of Veterinary Medicine, University of California, Davis

Daryl Lund  
Former Dean of Agricultural and Natural Resources, Rutgers University & Cornell University; Former Executive Director of the North Central Regional Association of State Agricultural Experiment Stations

Michael V. Martin  
President, Florida Gulf Coast University

Ali Mitchell  
Executive Director, Association of Northeast Extension Directors

Ron C. Mittelhammer  
Dean Emeritus, College of Agricultural, Human and Natural Resource Services, Washington State University

Bobby Moser  
Former Vice President, College of Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, The Ohio State University
Sabine O’Hara  
Dean, of CAUSES and Land-grant Programs, College of Agriculture, Urban Sustainability and Environmental Sciences (CAUSES), University of the District of Columbia

Jack Payne  
Senior Vice President, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida

Thomas L. Payne  
Vice Chancellor and Dean Emeritus, College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources, University of Missouri

William A. Payne  
Dean, College of Agriculture, Biotechnology and Natural Resources, University of Nevada Reno

Barbara Petty  
Associate Dean and Director of Extension, University of Idaho

Chandra Reddy  
Dean and Director of Research/Administrator of Extension, College of Agriculture, Human, and Natural Sciences, Tennessee State University

Chuck Ross  
Director, University of Vermont Extension
Alan Sams
Reub Long Dean, College of Agricultural Sciences, and Director, Oregon Agricultural Experiment Station, Oregon State University

Eugene G. Sander
President Emeritus, Former Vice President and Dean for Agriculture and Life Sciences, University of Arizona

Fred Schlutt
Vice Provost for Extension and Outreach and Director of Cooperative Extension Service, University of Alaska Fairbanks

Milo Shult
Vice President for Agriculture, Emeritus, University of Arkansas

Robert W. Taylor
Dean, College of Agriculture and Food Sciences, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University

Andrew J. Thulin
Dean, College of Agriculture, Food, and Environmental Sciences, California Polytechnic State University

Thomas Vogelmann
Dean, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, University of Vermont
Christopher B. Watkins  
Associate Dean, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences and College of Human Ecology and  
Director, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Cornell University

Lynn Wooten  
Dean, The Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, Cornell  
University

Jon Wraith  
Dean, College of Life Sciences and Agriculture and Director, NH Agricultural Experiment  
Station, University of New Hampshire

André-Denis Girard Wright  
Dean, College of Agricultural, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences, Washington State  
University

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Oscar Taylor, Texas

Jake Tibbitts, Nevada