



ASA Board of Directors Statement of Concern for the USDA Economic Research Service and on the Vital and Unique Role of Federal Statistical Agencies

December 3, 2018

The federal statistical system forms the foundation of US evidence-based policymaking and data-driven decision-making. The policies and decisions the system informs blanket the public and private spectrum, from an 18-year-old deciding on a career, to a Fortune 500 company deciding where to place its new facility, to determining representation in the US House of Representatives. The National Academy of Sciences states the importance of the federal statistical system in a similarly compelling manner:¹ “The reason for a statistical agency to exist is to serve as a trustworthy source of objective, relevant, accurate, and timely information for decision-makers, analysts, and others—both inside and outside the government—to help them understand present conditions, draw comparisons with the past, and guide plans for the future.”

Given its unique and vital role to inform far-reaching decisions in the American government, economy, and society, it is imperative the federal statistical system—composed of 13 Office of Management and Budget (OMB)–designated primary federal statistical agencies and scores of other units spread across the federal government—be maintained as independent, trustworthy, and adequately resourced.

Recognizing the importance of federal statistical agencies to the \$1 trillion food, agriculture, and rural economies, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has two federal statistical agencies: the Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). NASS reports cover a broad range of topics, including “production and supplies of food and fiber, prices paid and received by farmers, farm labor and wages, farm finances, chemical use, and changes in the demographics of US producers.”² ERS’s mission is to complement the

¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2017. *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency*. Sixth Edition. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
<https://doi.org/10.17226/24810>.

² https://www.nass.usda.gov/About_NASS/index.php

NASS reports by anticipating “trends and emerging issues in agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America and to conduct[ing] high-quality, objective economic research to inform and enhance public and private decision-making.”³

The American Statistical Association (ASA) Board of Directors is deeply concerned by USDA’s August 2018 announcement that it would be relocating the majority of ERS’s staff outside Washington, DC, and realigning ERS from the USDA Research, Education, and Economics (REE) mission area to the USDA Office of the Chief Economist (OCE) in the secretary’s office. As an ASA document released earlier in November states,⁴ USDA’s rationale is “generally found to be lacking in substance or evidence, or needing additional and independent study” and it is unclear what problems the USDA seeks to address. USDA’s process is also troubling for its lack of consultation with stakeholders, Congress, and ERS experts prior to this decision; seeming disregard for concerns voiced after its decision; and the speed with which the department seeks to act.

The ASA Board is especially troubled by the likely denigration of the quality, breadth, and timeliness of ERS reports, analysis, and statistics and the ensuing ramification for evidence-based policymaking in the food, agriculture, and rural sectors. ERS is currently ranked number three in the world among agricultural economics institutions,⁵ which validates the high quality of its work. If the office is relocated far from its current location, substantial staff loss is likely due to employees’ unwillingness or inability to relocate. The resulting diminution in expertise could take years to replace and rebuild.

The relocation of ERS outside the Washington, DC, area is also likely to negatively affect the influence and quality of its work by taking it away from its key audiences, collaborators, and partners.

Finally, the realignment of ERS from REE to OCE is likely to jeopardize the policy-neutral work of the ERS because it will no longer be in the information-providing arm, but in a policy-supporting office instead. Further, in the OCE, it will be more difficult to leverage, integrate, and complement the work of ERS with that of the other REE agencies.

For the continued maximum benefit of evidence-based policymaking in the food, agriculture, and rural economy, the ASA Board of Directors urges the USDA Economic Research Service be kept geographically in the national capital region and administratively in the USDA Research, Education, and Economics mission area at least until a comprehensive, independent cost-benefit analysis has been completed, reviewed, and discussed.

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

⁴ https://www.amstat.org/asa/files/pdfs/AddressingUSDA_Rationale.pdf

⁵ <https://ideas.repec.org/top/top.agr.html#institutions>