

May 13, 2013

The Honorable Mark Pryor
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
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Pryor 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 Fiscal Year 2014 (FY14). The Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Agriculture Statistics Service (NASS) produce the data and information that are essential for well-functioning agricultural commodity and food markets. Those markets cannot function without the support of government-managed and produced statistics. The agencies also provide information that plays important roles in feeding the nation, revitalizing rural America, and increasing our competitiveness internationally.

We urge that these agencies be funded at their FY14 request levels (\$78.5 million for ERS and \$159 million for NASS). These levels are necessary to avoid cutting programs that are vital to the large portion of America's economy that is dependent on agricultural and food industries. Both agencies' budgets were cut significantly in FY13, leading to cancellation of or reductions in programs on which many in the agricultural community depend.

The eight percent budget cut that ERS experienced between 2012 and 2013 has meant that it has had to reduce the content of, the frequency of, or suspend periodic reports on the outlook or prices for dairy, livestock and poultry, aquaculture, rice, vegetables and pulses, fruits and tree-nuts. It has also discontinued updates for several data series and/or reduced the level of geographic detail for which other data (including agricultural productivity and rural socioeconomic indicators) are available. It has had to discontinue updates of fertilizer data and suspend its series on commodity consumption by population. Because FY14 proposed funding for ERS does not restore what it lost in 2013, these outlook data are not likely to be reinstated in the short run. If the agency receives less than the FY14 budget amount that has been proposed, it will have to reduce additional programs in which real people have serious stakes.

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 American farm households.

While we appreciate the anomaly in the final FY13 bill for NASS to carry out the Census of Agriculture, we urge you to stand the line at the level proposed for FY14 in order to restore non-Census NASS programs to pre-sequestration levels NASS has had to suspend data collection and reports on a large variety of crops and a few livestock products.ⁱ While FY14 funding at the President's level does not assure that these surveys are restored, anything less than the FY14 proposal surely dooms them. NASS statistics provide the information necessary to keep agricultural markets stable and efficient. In addition to other projects, the agency conducts the quinquennial U.S. Census of Agriculture. The value of information from the Census to your work is evident as one views the statistical data from the last Census of Agriculture on county, State and Congressional websites. These data are available at the Congressional District level, and appear to get substantial use. Valuable Census data include the average value of agricultural products sold per farm in each state, the percentage increase/decrease of farms in your state cropland area 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 FY14 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.

Agricultural & Applied Economics Association
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 on Food, Agricultural, and Resource Economics

Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics
Crop Science Society of America
Fertilizer Institute
Global Cold Chain Alliance
International Association of Refrigerated Warehouses
National Coalition for Food and Agricultural Research
Rural Sociological Society
Soil Science Society of America
Southern Agricultural Economics Association
Western Agricultural Economics Association

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

ⁱ From http://nass.usda.gov/Newsroom/Notices/03_12_2013.asp:

- All Catfish and Trout Reports including Catfish Feed Deliveries and Catfish Processing
- July Cattle Report
- Potato Stocks Reports
- All Non-Citrus Fruit, Nut and Vegetable Forecasts and Estimates
- June Rice Stocks Report
- All Hops and Hops Stocks Estimates
- Mink Report
- Milk Production Reports including Production, Disposition and Income
- June on- and off-farm stocks for Austrian Winter Peas, Chickpeas, Dry Peas and Lentils
- July acreage forecasts for Austrian Winter Peas, Dry Edible Peas and Lentils