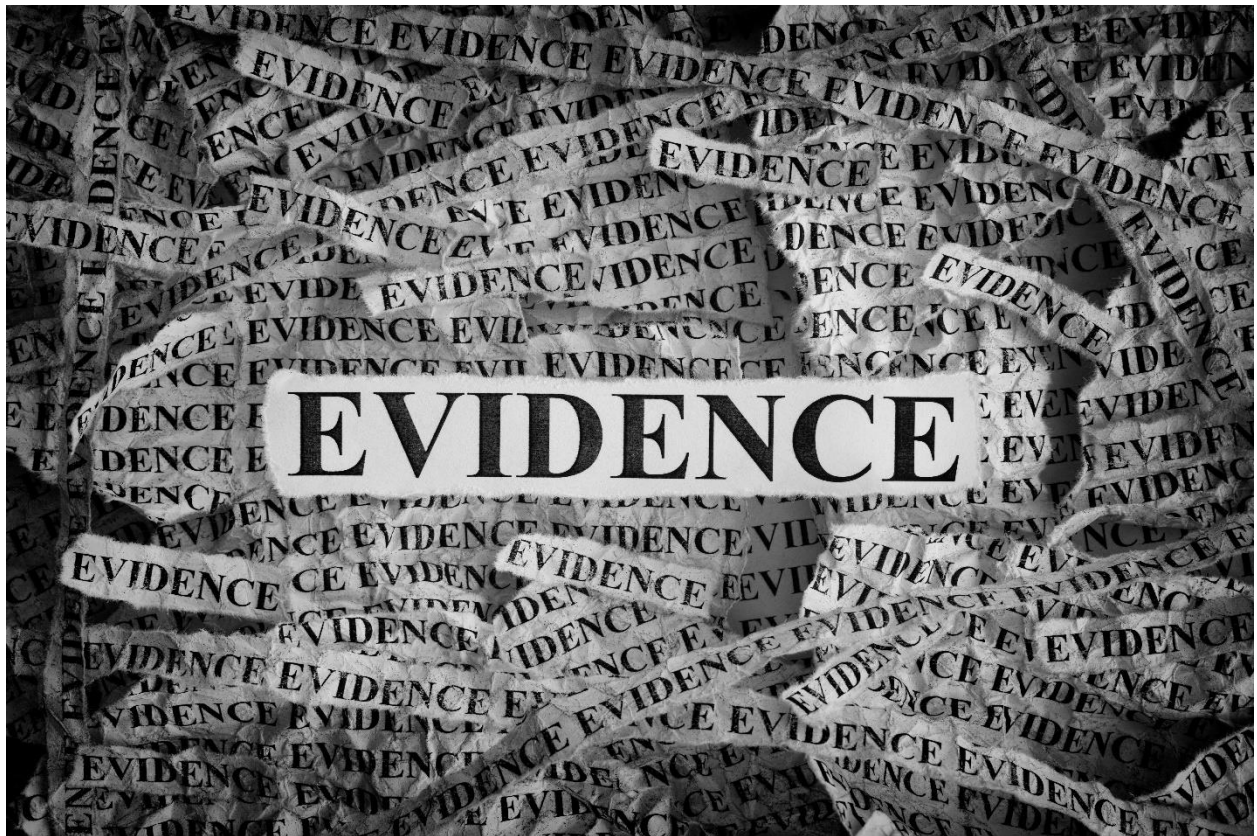


The American Statistical Association Board of Directors Decries USDA Undermining of Federal Statistical Agency and Evidence-Based Policymaking

Highlights unique and critical role of government statistics in society



Getty Images

The American Statistical Association (ASA) Board of Directors has issued a rare [statement of concern](#) regarding the US Department of Agriculture's plans for the Economic Research Service (ERS), a federal statistical agency. "Moving the ERS outside of the nation's capital and having it in the secretary's office undermines evidence-based policymaking in the food, agriculture and rural sectors of our economy and society," says ASA President Lisa LaVange. "If relocated, it is likely to take years for ERS to rebuild its staff and programs to the same high [level of] quality it is now."

“Moving the ERS from the information-providing arm of the USDA to a policy-supporting function in the secretary’s office also jeopardizes ERS’s reputation for providing policy-neutral reports, information and statistics,” states ASA Executive Director Ron Wasserstein. “As a White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) policy directive states, ‘It is paramount that federal statistical agencies and recognized statistical units produce data that are impartial, clear and complete and are readily perceived as such by the public. ... Accordingly, federal statistical agencies and recognized statistical units must function in an environment that is clearly separate and autonomous from the other administrative, regulatory, law enforcement or policy-making activities within their respective departments.’ For ERS to meet this criterion as a federal statistical agency, it should be kept in the USDA research arm, fully insulated from the secretary’s office.”

The [statement](#) frames the concern for ERS as one of two USDA federal statistical agencies and 13 OMB-designated federal statistical agencies whose products are the foundation of US evidence-based policymaking and data-driven decision-making. The document punctuates their importance by quoting a National Academy of Sciences document, *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency*: “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.”

“Just as the US has a physical infrastructure supporting our commerce, security, health and everyday lives, we have a data infrastructure supporting decisions and policies across an equally broad swath,” adds LaVange. “Because the data from the federal statistical agencies are the gold standard of objective, timely data in their respective sectors, they are the bedrock of the US data infrastructure. Weakening our data infrastructure weakens or forestalls decisions and policymaking. This is why federal statistical agencies play such a unique and vital role in our country and why we should be doing our utmost to protect their functioning and integrity.”

The ASA Board has issued few such statements of concern over the [past two decades](#), this one being the only one to relate to an entire federal statistical agency. In deliberating the issuing of such a statement, the board considered USDA’s budget request for the current fiscal year released in February of 2018 in which it proposed to cut the ERS programs and activities by 60%, a clear sign of the department’s low regard for ERS and its intent to dismantle its wide-ranging work.

The [ASA Board’s statement](#) is the latest in a long line of broad opposition to USDA’s plans by USDA stakeholders. Last week, USDA chief scientists under presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama spent two days lobbying Congress in a follow-up to a [letter to Congress signed by them and 19 other current and former university agricultural heads](#). In October, [56 former USDA and federal statistical agency officials spanning five decades expressed their opposition to the plan in a letter to Congress](#). The chief statistician of the United States for 24 years, Katherine Wallman, was one of the letter’s signers and [commented](#), “The USDA’s dismantling of the Economic Research Service is the biggest threat to a federal statistical agency in many years.”

There have also been numerous letters sent to Congress by individual organizations and coalitions, the [latest one dated November 13 and signed by 60 organizations](#) urging congressional appropriators to prohibit USDA from using FY19 funding for the move and relocation.

As the oldest scientific society in the United States, the ASA has a long history of supporting evidence-based policymaking, starting with the first modernization of the decennial census in the 1840s. In this tradition, the ASA immediately recognized how detrimental USDA's actions would be to evidence-based policymaking in the food, agriculture and rural economies. It joined with the broader USDA research stakeholder community to oppose the USDA actions. As part of those efforts, the ASA released a [document addressing the rationale provided by USDA for its upheaval of the USDA research arm](#). In it, [ASA President LaVange states](#), "The USDA's case for moving and realigning the Economic Research Service fails to justify the uprooting and disruption of such an important, effective and well-run agency."

###

See also the November 28 press release, [Leaders in Agricultural Community Decry Proposed USDA Reorganization](#), and the November 14 press release, [Widespread Concern Increases Over Lack of Evidence for Controversial USDA Upheaval of Research Arm](#).

Contact: Steve Pierson, pierson@amstat.org, (703) 302-1841.

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.

As part of ASA's commitment to support the importance of government statistics for evidence-based policymaking, ASA created [Count on Stats](#). In partnership with over a dozen organizations, the initiative is designed to educate and inform the public about the critically important nature of federal data. Without federal agencies' data collection and analysis, we would not have key insights into nutrition, economic trends, community issues, public safety, agriculture, and countless other facets that are vital to our society. For additional information, please visit the Count on Stats website at www.countonstats.org.