

Widespread Concern Increases Over Lack of Evidence for Controversial USDA Upheaval of Research Arm

*American Statistical Association calls on Congress to intervene, requests
independent analysis of department's claims*



Photo by rawpixel.com from Pexels

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s reorganization plan, which would relocate a key agricultural research agency outside Washington, DC, has drawn increasing criticism from those who know and depend on its economic and statistical analyses. First announced during Congress's summer recess in August, the reorganization plan for the USDA's Economic Research

Service (ERS) has been closed off to congressional input and public comment—in stark contrast to other recent federal agency reorganization plans.

Despite the USDA's claim that it has conducted an internal cost-benefit analysis showing numerous benefits, the agency has failed to share these findings with those who rely on ERS research—notably agricultural economists, policymakers and farmers. At the same time, many organizations and former USDA officials have warned that, instead of delivering benefits, the USDA plan jeopardizes the quality of the ERS's work to the likely detriment of the food, agriculture and rural economies.

Lacking access to USDA's analysis, the American Statistical Association [researched and compiled responses](#) to the agency's publicly stated rationale for the reorganization. The USDA's three main reasons for the relocation are: (i) "to improve USDA's ability to attract and retain highly qualified staff"; (ii) "to place these important USDA resources closer to many of its stakeholders"; and (iii) "to benefit the American taxpayers." A second shift—an organizational restructuring that would see the ERS move into the office of the chief economist—will "enhance the effectiveness of economic analysis at USDA," the agency says.

But experts on USDA and federal statistical agencies say the move will most likely undermine ERS's high-quality and important work for three main reasons. First, there will be substantial loss of experience and expertise from the many staff unable or unwilling to relocate. Second, by removing the bulk of ERS staff from the nation's capital, the ERS will be less connected to the national discussion on agriculture. Many agriculture and food organizations are based in DC because of the proximity to policymakers and other agencies and expert groups. Finally, by moving ERS from the research arm of USDA to a policy-supporting arm in the secretary's office, its reputation as a policy-neutral agency is threatened.

"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," said ASA President Lisa LaVange.

"It's hard to look at USDA's rationale and not ask, 'Where's the beef?'," said ASA Executive Director Ron Wasserstein. "The American public deserves a better understanding of the alleged problems being addressed and the ramifications of the 'fix.' As the number three-ranked agricultural economics institution in the world, the Economic Research Service clearly ain't broke."

"For the sake of good government and transparency," said LaVange, "Congress should put a stop to USDA's plans until we know more. Federal statistical agencies are the bedrock of US data infrastructure and evidence-based policymaking in the public and private sectors. With their unique and vital role of information decision-making so broad, Congress and the administration should be strengthening these agencies."

As an indication of the gravity of the situation, the former chief statistician of the United States who held the position for 24 years, Katherine Wallman, has [called USDA's proposals for ERS](#) "the biggest threat to a federal statistical agency in many years."

ASA's document is titled "[Addressing the USDA's Rationale for Relocating and Realigning the Economic Research Service.](#)"

###

See also September 6, 2018, press release, [Penny-Wise, Dollar-Foolish Move at USDA Amounts to Big American Food and Agriculture Loss](#); September 13 press release, [New USDA Personnel Data Spurs ASA to Reiterate Call for Congress to Block USDA Move](#); September 19 press release, [Congress Seeks Answers to USDA's Agencies Move](#); and October 9 press release, [Leaders Across Five Decades Unite to Oppose USDA Plans](#).

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 the ASA's commitment to support the importance of government statistics for evidence-based policymaking, it created [Count on Stats](#). In partnership with more than 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.