

Penny-Wise, Dollar-Foolish Move at USDA Amounts to Big American Food and Agriculture Loss

Announced in a terse one-page memo during the doldrums of August, a surprise decision by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) will, say experts, have a disproportionate and detrimental effect on the farm, food and rural economy. The August 9 USDA decision to move the Economic Research Service (ERS) out of Washington, DC, will drive a brain drain from a vital research component in the nation's \$1 trillion food, agriculture, and rural economy.

"On the face of it, the USDA move looks like common sense," says American Statistical Association President Lisa LaVange. "The cost of living in Washington is high, and there are savings to be made by moving these agencies to places where the cost of living is lower. It's also good to spread federal government agencies across the US and not have them all based in the capital."

But, according to LaVange, there is a practical consequence to this relocation. Many of these employees are not going to readily move their homes and families. And their expertise is not something that can be replaced easily. "It's taken years to build this agency into a world-class center of research filled with world-class experts," says LaVange. "They can and will take jobs that allow them to stay in their homes and keep their kids in the same schools; they most likely will resign or take early retirement rather than move."

Ranked the [#3 agricultural economics research institution in the world](#), the ERS employs 330 people who provide [economic research on and analysis](#) of emerging issues in agriculture, food, the environment and rural America. The interdisciplinary teams of economists, sociologists, statisticians, demographers and agriculture experts also cover global trade and food safety.

A brain drain from ERS will hit small farmers the hardest, says Susan Offutt, ERS administrator under President Bill Clinton and President George W. Bush. "The ERS informs and helps facilitate competitive markets for agricultural products. Its free and publicly available reports help level the playing field for the 1.9 million small farmers who don't have the budget to afford the data and analytics provided by the private sector."

And what's bad for small farmers is bad for consumers. "American consumers don't realize how much ERS research benefits them," says Scott Swinton, past-president of the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association (AAEA). "The ERS is an indispensable source of objective, national data and analysis for farmers, for industry, for policymakers. If we want to grow our agriculture, improve nutrition, conserve water efficiently—ERS research is key."

Another concern is the future of food safety. Patricia Buck, executive director of the Center for Foodborne Illness Research and Prevention, worries the critical information flow and analysis needed for effective policymaking will be disrupted. "Removing ERS from the hub of policymaking decisions in Washington," she says, "will limit the agency's ability to interact with those food safety stakeholders responsible for developing policies and regulations that protect Americans from foodborne diseases."

Concern is so great about the damage the move will inflict on the nation's ability to design and implement effective policy that [42 organizations—including the American Statistical Association—wrote to Congress in August](#), urging that ERS stay in the Washington, DC, area, that it be protected as an independent statistical agency and that it be given the resources needed to maintain the credibility and integrity of its research. The AAEA—along with professional associations, college deans and university departments—also [wrote to Congress](#) highlighting the importance of sustaining ERS research capacity and quality.

All these groups also oppose a decision that would see the ERS lose its independence within the organizational structure of the USDA. Not only would it move out of Washington, it would move into the policy wing of USDA, thereby creating potential conflicts of interest. The policy arm of USDA supports the secretary of agriculture's policies; ERS staff have—by virtue of the agency's independence and place in the organization structure—been insulated from these policy concerns.

"They are trustworthy researchers who look at rural issues with clear eyes, not with political preconceptions and corporate allegiances," says Tim Marema, editor of *The Daily Yonder*, a publication of the nonpartisan Center for Rural Strategies based in Whitesburg, Kentucky. "We'd be dead in the water without them. The ERS is indispensable for anyone who really wants to know what's happening in rural America."

"In a stroke, an agency that took a century to build, an agency that contributes absolutely vital knowledge about farming, agriculture, and rural America, will be set back decades," says LaVange. "That is just too big a loss to evidence-based policymaking in our food, agriculture, and rural economy. The ERS should be kept in the Washington area and under the Research, Education and Economics Mission Area to maintain its independence and premier work."

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- Tim Marema: Tim@ruralstrategies.org

- Susan Offutt: susan.offutt@gmail.com; Offutt also authored an 8/27/18 piece for *The Hill*: [The Department of Agriculture has a world class economics research institution ... and is throwing it away.](#)
- Scott Swinton: swintons@msu.edu; Swinton authored an 8/27/18 piece for the *Des Moines Register*: [Knowing the value of America's food.](#)

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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.

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