

Leaders Across Five Decades Unite to Oppose USDA Plans

56 former officials caution Congress changes will harm agriculture, rural economy

Manifesting alarm over the USDA's plan to reorganize and relocate two statistical and research agencies, 56 former USDA and federal statistical agency officials, including former deputy and undersecretaries, have [written to Congress](#) to warn of the likely damage to US agriculture and farming and to urge the proposed plans be abandoned.

"I urge the administration to seriously consider the concerns of the many stakeholders who place high value on the data, research and other intelligence provided by the Economic Research Service (ERS) and avoid actions that threaten the long-term viability of the agency or its near-term productivity," said John Lee, ERS administrator under Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton.

"USDA's justification for this upheaval of evidence-based policymaking is completely lacking," said Katherine Smith Evans, ERS administrator under George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

"The USDA's evidence-lite justification for USDA to so radically uproot its world-class research, economics and statistical agencies *is* the reason the Economic Research Service should be kept in Washington, DC, and in the USDA research arm. We need its objective and respected analysis to support evidence-based policymaking in our \$1 trillion food, agriculture and rural economy," said Susan Offutt, ERS administrator under Clinton and George W. Bush.

USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue announced in August that the department's National Institute of Food and Agriculture and ERS would be moved out of Washington, DC, to save money and be closer to the agricultural community. The USDA also said the move would help tackle the ERS's poor job retention rate, which was significantly higher than the USDA as a whole.

The American Statistical Association [noted](#) the USDA's numbers on ERS were inflated by including summer interns, who all leave after their internships. Far from helping the ERS retain employees, the move is likely to create a brain drain, as economists and statisticians elect to either retire or keep their families in their homes and schools.

“Major relocation of a significant portion of the staff will result in many separations and a disastrous loss of expertise, from which it would take years to recover,” said Lee.

Other signatories questioned how moving the agencies to a location outside DC could bring them closer to the agricultural community they serve.

“It’s hard to imagine Florida, Georgia and other southern producers benefiting from USDA moving their research and economic statistical agencies to Fargo or Topeka or anywhere outside of DC,” said Georgia native Gale Buchanan, USDA chief scientist under George W. Bush. “Both as a researcher and especially as an agricultural administrator who made periodic visits to Washington, DC, I could visit ERS, other agricultural agencies and other federal agencies along with visits with the states’ congressional delegation. Like it or not, ERS becomes less relevant outside of Washington.”

“Because food and agricultural policy is primarily a federal responsibility, much of the agency’s constituency—which includes farm organizations—is clustered around Washington, DC,” said Neilson Conklin, who headed the ERS Market and Trade Economics Division under presidents Clinton and George W. Bush. “Although ERS research and analysis also provide critical information for farmers, ranchers and agricultural businesses to make the decisions necessary to adapt, compete and survive, it is hard to see how moving ERS to a single location outside of the Washington area will bring the agency any closer to this group of constituents.”

Moving the agencies outside Washington will also make collaborating with other federal agencies and advising Congress more difficult. The ERS’s “research agenda arises largely from the activities of every agency of USDA,” said John A. Schnittker, undersecretary and deputy secretary for USDA in the Lyndon Johnson administration. “And its research results are directly applicable to the food and agricultural policies debated and adopted by Congress. The Economic Research Service should remain in Washington.”

Richard E. Rominger, USDA deputy secretary under Clinton, concurred. “My fear is that moving the agencies out of Washington will diminish their effectiveness in interacting with policymakers in the administration and Congress.”

“Collaborations with other federal statistical agencies have been key to ERS success in creating new information and analysis to support USDA’s food and nutrition programs,” said Laurian Unnevehr, former head of ERS Food Economics in the Obama administration. “Moving ERS outside of the capitol region would weaken these ongoing efforts to develop new data about food consumers and food consumption patterns.”

Former National Agricultural Statistics Service administrator Cynthia Clark agreed. “ERS maximizes the value of agricultural statistics by using them in combination with other official statistics and program data to objectively address critical societal issues relevant to agricultural production (e.g., environment, food and nutrition, rural life, energy, trade, and climate

change),” said Clark. “This work relies on organizational independence from the policy arm of USDA and collaboration with statistical and program agencies situated in the Washington, DC, area.”

Signatories to the letter worked under nine administrations and included a wide range of USDA officials; they were joined by many past directors of the US Census Bureau and leaders of other federal statistical agencies. The letter was organized by the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics and the American Statistical Association.

The outpouring of concern is without recent precedent. As Katherine Wallman, former chief statistician of the United States and the 1992 president of the American Statistical Association, noted, “The USDA’s dismantling of the Economic Research Service is the biggest threat to a federal statistical agency in many years. Its actions undermine the autonomy that is critical to ERS’s credibility and effectiveness. Now more than ever we need to strengthen our federal statistical agencies so they can maintain their bedrock role in the US data infrastructure. Congress should intervene to keep ERS the world-class, respected agency it is and prevent this nonsensical move.”

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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](#); and September 19 press release, [Congress Seeks Answers to USDA’s Agencies Move](#).

Identical versions of the letter were sent to House and Senate [authorizers](#) and [appropriators](#).

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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.

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.