

## American Statistical Association, Other Leaders Maintain USDA's Upheaval of Research Arm Unwise, Counterproductive

In reaction to the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) announcement of its ["middle" list of finalists](#) to host the Economic Research Service (ERS) and National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), the American Statistical Association (ASA) and agricultural research leaders reiterated their concerns and opposition.

"We're disappointed to see USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue persisting in his plans to uproot the USDA research arm, despite the overwhelming concerns of its former leaders and the greater statistical and agricultural research community," said Ron Wasserstein, executive director of the ASA. "The USDA leadership developed their plans without consulting any of the agency's current or former research and statistical heads or the broader research community. With that community now having strongly voiced its concerns and opposition, USDA seems intent to proceed without course corrections."

"We thank Congress for expressing its concerns and seeking clarity from USDA for both the rationale and the costs and impacts of the ERS/NIFA move," said 2019 ASA President Karen Kafadar. "Regrettably, USDA's announcement today dismisses the input from ERS/NIFA's customers and stakeholders, primarily policy- and decision-makers. We continue to believe that this move is not only costly to US taxpayers but removes ERS from its critical mission, 'to conduct high-quality, objective economic research to inform and enhance public and private decision-making.' We strongly urge Congress to halt USDA's plans to move ERS/NIFA to protect the research and statistical foundations of our food, agricultural and rural economies."

"There is good news in today's announcement: The many critics in the non-listed communities can now speak more freely," added Wasserstein.

Others in the community also reacted to the announcement.

Gale Buchanan, USDA chief scientist and undersecretary in the George W. Bush administration, pointed out, "USDA has yet to address two basic questions:

1. What are the problems they are proposing to fix?
2. How will the proposal make the agricultural research system better?

I'm confident the reason these questions go unanswered is the moves don't fix a problem and the system won't be improved. USDA's announcement is another step in the wrong direction."

Catherine Woteki, USDA chief scientist and undersecretary in the Barack Obama administration, added her concern in light of the precipitous drops of ERS and NIFA in the annual [Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings](#). “The rankings drop and the reports of high attrition rates trickling out in recent months are very troubling. They are, however, only a fraction of the eventual rankings drop and brain drain expected by an actual move to one of the middle-list locations. It’s time for the USDA to listen to its employees and the outside expert and stakeholder community to withdraw their ill-advised plans.”

“The foundation of sound government decision-making is good information,” said Susan Offutt, administrator of ERS under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. “By not consulting all the members of the community who value ERS and by not examining the costs and benefits of the plan for relocation and realignment in a systematic analysis, the department shreds its credibility by insisting it has made the right decision without considering all the evidence.”

The USDA announced their plans to relocate ERS and NIFA outside of Washington, DC, and to realign ERS to the Office of the Chief Economist in a short [August 9 press release](#). The broader agricultural research community has been united and vocal in their opposition. In October, 56 former USDA and federal statistical agency officials, including former deputy and undersecretaries, [wrote to Congress](#) warning of likely damage to US agriculture and farming and urging the proposed plans be abandoned. In November, Buchanan and Woteki led a [letter of university administrative heads of agriculture](#) that has now garnered 56 total signers from across the country. Fifty-five professional societies and related groups have [consistently expressed their concern and opposition](#), this [November 13 letter being one example](#). A [November ASA document](#) addressed USDA’s rationale for the ERS moves and found it lacking and failing to justify the upheaval of the Research, Education, and Economics mission area.

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See also the February 14 press release, [American Statistical Association Statement on Reintroduction of Agricultural Research Integrity Act and Fiscal Year 2019 Explanatory Statement Putting Brakes on Controversial USDA Research Arm Restructuring](#), the December 5 press release, [The American Statistical Association Board of Directors Decries USDA Undermining of Federal Statistical Agency and Evidence-Based Policymaking](#), and the November 14 press release, [Widespread Concern Increases Over Lack of Evidence for Controversial USDA Upheaval of Research Arm](#).

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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](http://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](http://www.countonstats.org).