October 9, 2018

Dear Chairs Hoeven and Aderholt and Ranking Members Bishop and Merkley,

Recently, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) proposed to move the Economic Research Service (ERS) out of the DC geographic area and place it organizationally under the Office of the Chief Economist. As one of the principal federal statistical agencies, ERS provides Congress, state and local governments, and the commodity community with critical research and data on agricultural and rural communities. Removing the agency from the Washington, DC, area poses risks to the quality and relevance of the information ERS produces.

As former senior administration officials and heads of statistical agencies invested in informing evidence-based policy decisions, our primary concerns are the following:

1. **Retaining staff expertise**
   While current professional staff members will be offered the opportunity to retain their positions, it is anticipated that many will not move. ERS has already lost a respected and effective administrator. Staff attrition will dilute valuable organizational knowledge and expertise and damage established networks, even if newly vacated positions are filled.

2. **Continuing valuable collaborations**
   ERS is one of the principal federal statistical agencies, all of which are in the DC area. ERS has an integrated approach to its broad research portfolio, in part due to its ability to collaborate. Locating it far from its collaborators, both within and outside the USDA, will severely limit its contributions to important activities such as the Agricultural
Resource Management Survey, which is carried out in cooperation with the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

3. **Maintaining visibility with policymakers**
ERS currently responds efficiently and effectively to requests from Congress and other agencies. ERS provides timely and relevant economic research and analysis to inform important policy decisions. Removing ERS from its proximity to key consumers means policy decisions may be made without the best analysis available, to the detriment of some of our nation’s most vulnerable communities.

4. **Risks to independence and credibility**
The federal statistical agencies provide relevant, accurate, and timely information. Removing ERS from its position in the Research Education and Economics Mission Area to place it under the USDA chief economist jeopardizes its independence as a research agency and increases the potential for interference in the direction, design, analysis, and release of studies and reports. It threatens the independence and credibility necessary for a federal statistical agency to function objectively.

ERS is ranked as number three in the world of institutions in the field of agricultural economics, a reflection of our leadership in economic research. This proposal puts a world-renowned research agency at risk and could set back the federal statistical system at a time when the United States should be leading the world in innovation. In closing, we urge you to keep ERS in the Research Education and Economics Mission Area within the USDA and to keep the agency in the Capital region.

Sincerely,

Donald Bay, Administrator, National Agriculture Statistics Service, USDA, 1992 – 1999
Jack Buckley, Commissioner, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011 – 2013
Carol S. Carson, Director, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Commerce Department, 1992 – 1995
Kevin W. Concannon, Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services, USDA, 2009 – 2017


Guy Caruso, Administrator, Energy Information Administration, 2002 – 2008


Emerson J. Elliott, Commissioner, National Center for Education Statistics, 1984 – 1995

Martha Farnsworth Riche, Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 1996 – 1999

Philip N. Fulton, Associate Administrator, Economic Research Service, USDA, 2000 – 2005

John R. Gawalt, Director, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2012 – 2018


Carol C. House, Deputy Administrator, National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA, 2006 – 2010


James Lynch, Director, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010 – 2013

Tom Mesenbourg, Deputy Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 – 2013

Elsa Murano, Undersecretary for Food Safety, Food Safety and Inspection Service, USDA, 2001 – 2004

Steve Murdoch, Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 – 2009

Richard Newell, Administrator, Energy Information Administration, 2009 – 2011


Gregory L. Parham, Assistant Secretary, Departmental Administration and Administrator, USDA, 2013 – 2017
Robin Picanso, Associate Administrator, National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA, 2014 – 2017
Kenneth Prewitt, Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 1998 – 2001
Richard E. Rominger, Deputy Secretary, USDA, 1993 – 2001
John A. Schnittker, Undersecretary and Deputy Secretary, USDA, 1965 – 1969
Jeffrey L. Sedgwick, Director, Bureau of Justice Statistics, United States Department of Justice, 2006 – 2008
Edward J. Sondik, Director, National Center for Health Statistics, CDC/DHHS, 1996 – 2013
Angie Tagtow, Executive Director, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, USDA, 2014 – 2017
John Thompson, Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 2013 – 2017
Robert L. Thompson, Assistant Secretary for Economics, USDA, 1985 – 1987
Shirley Robinson Watkins, Secretary of Agriculture for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services, USDA, 1997 – 2001
James C. Webster, Assistant Secretary for Governmental and Public Affairs, USDA, 1977 – 1981
Kathryn Wilson, Deputy Undersecretary, Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services, USDA, 2015 – 2017