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September 7, 2018

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We write to inquire about your recent announcement concerning the planned reorganization and relocation of the Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) (“the proposal”). Both agencies play a critical role in advancing agricultural research and analysis on topics such as, food and nutrition, food safety, global markets and trade, resources and environment and the rural and agricultural economy.

The Department’s economics and research functions are placed within the responsibilities of the Under Secretary of Agriculture for Research, Education, and Economics (REE). ERS currently reports to the Under Secretary for REE. The proposed reorganization would instead place ERS’s approximately 300 employees in the Secretary’s office, reporting to the Chief Economist, who advises the Secretary on the economic impact of USDA’s policies and programs. The proposal would also move NIFA’s roughly 400 employees and ERS’ roughly 300 employees to a location outside of the National Capital Region.

Some stakeholders have raised concerns about the proposal. One of the concerns raised by stakeholders is that a large number of employees will be unable to relocate, causing a sharp loss of knowledgeable staff. Additionally, stakeholders are concerned that relocating experts outside of the National Capitol Region will erode critical partnerships with other federal agencies who are engaged in interdisciplinary research important for preventing of infectious disease, improving bioenergy efficiency, and dealing with emerging threats like Zika and Ebola.

Given that these agencies conduct invaluable research and economic analysis critical to the strength of our agricultural and rural economy, we respectfully request that the Department provide responses to the following questions as soon as possible.

1. What are the goals of this proposed reorganization and relocation?
2. Have stakeholders raised concerns about the current organization and location of ERS and NIFA? If so, what are the concerns?
3. What benefits does USDA believe will be generated from this reorganization? Does USDA foresee any potential negatives or downsides associated with it?
4. Please describe any alternatives to this reorganization and relocation that were considered by USDA.

5. USDA has stated that this reorganization and relocation will save resources. Please provide any cost benefit analysis that USDA used to support the statement of saving resources.
6. USDA stated that one reason for relocating NIFA and ERS employees outside the national capital region is because of the difficulty recruiting and retaining NIFA and ERS employees to the Washington, DC region given the high cost of living and long commutes. What evidence did USDA rely on in reaching that conclusion?
7. What is the Department's plan for ensuring program continuity and efficiency of administering grants through NIFA and the issuance of the critical reports and research produced by ERS?
8. It is important that USDA is prepared to address any attrition from the relocation.
 - a. What plans does USDA have to manage its workforce to mitigate and remedy any loss in skills that would result from this proposal?
 - b. Following the relocation, what percent of NIFA's and ERS's current workforce would USDA rehire?
 - c. How long does USDA anticipate it will take it to hire new personnel to address the resulting attrition?
 - d. Please provide the current hiring plans for NIFA and ERS.
9. What is the current timeline for all steps in this proposal?
10. 7 USC 6971 requires the Secretary to delegate to the Under Secretary of Agriculture for Research, Education, and Economics (REE) the functions and duties of the Department related to economics and research. 7 USC 7014(b)(6) makes permanent the role of the Under Secretary for REE. What legal authority is USDA using to reorganize ERS so that it reports to the Chief Economist, instead of being the economics research function granted by law to be the responsibility of the Under Secretary for REE?
11. We have heard concerns from stakeholders that placing the economic research function under the Office of the Chief Economist may diminish the scientific integrity of the economic analysis conducted by ERS. There are also concerns that locating NIFA at or near entities applying for grants may introduce a conflict of interest -- real or perceived -- into NIFA's grant awarding process. How will USDA protect against any such conflict of interest concerns? How will USDA protect the scientific integrity and independence of ERS?
12. What kind of stakeholder input did the Department conduct before announcing this proposal? Why is USDA not seeking comment from the public on this proposal before deciding to implement it?

Sincerely,



Pat Roberts
Chairman



Debbie Stabenow
Ranking Member