

November 4, 2019

The Honorable Richard Shelby  
Chairman  
Senate Appropriations Committee  
304 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy  
Ranking Member  
Senate Appropriations Committee  
437 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nita Lowey  
Chairwoman  
House Appropriations Committee  
2365 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kay Granger  
Ranking Member  
House Appropriations Committee  
1026 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Shelby, Ranking Member Leahy, Chairwoman Lowey, and Ranking Member Granger:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we write in strong opposition to the relocation of two key research agencies at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). In June, the House of Representatives passed an Agriculture/FDA Appropriations bill that would prohibit the relocation and ensure research staff remain in the National Capital Region. **We urge conferees to adopt the House position barring relocation of these critical research agencies.**

Since the beginning of this process in August 2018, USDA has not adequately justified the relocation of research staff. The arbitrary relocation has had a detrimental effect on staff morale and retention. Indeed, on October 17, the House Agriculture Committee's Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, and Research reported that 65% of ERS positions and 79% of NIFA positions are vacant. Longtime research staff with immeasurable institutional knowledge have left federal service due to the relocation.

Without the retention of adequate staff, the relocation has undermined core research functions at USDA. ERS is reported to delay or discontinue dozens of reports, data sets, and other analyses. NIFA has still not distributed grants by the end of the fiscal year, even though recipients have already been notified. In an effort to contravene the will of Congress, USDA has sparked a brain drain that threatens the prompt development of quality research products.

Nutrition and public health stakeholders – including state governments and localities – rely on ERS reports to make policy decisions related to the administration of nutrition assistance programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Several nutrition-related reports are reportedly delayed – including reports on veterans' food insecurity, the impact of nutrition assistance on rural economies, food purchasing patterns, and retail policies and patterns in SNAP and WIC. These delays will stymie progress in the states to more efficiently deliver quality nutrition services to millions of participants nationwide.

Federal nutrition programs work in tandem with American farmers and the agriculture sector to build a strong food supply chain that alleviates hunger in the United States. The researchers at ERS and NIFA manage broad portfolios that touch on every element of the food supply chain – from crop production to in-store product selection. We express our severe reservations that the relocation has undermined USDA's commitment to continuing quality nutrition research and analysis. For these reasons, we add our voice to those calling for Congress to adopt the House language and halt the relocation.

Sincerely,

1,000 Days

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

Advocates for Better Children's Diets

African American Health Alliance

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees

American Heart Association

American Public Health Association

Association of State Public Health Nutritionists

Bread for the World

Center for Law & Social Policy (CLASP)

Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI)

Children's HealthWatch

Coalition on Human Needs

First Focus Campaign for Children

Food Research & Action Center

MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

MomsRising

National WIC Association

NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice

Public Advocacy for Kids

Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior

ZERO TO THREE

cc: The Honorable John Hoeven  
The Honorable Jeff Merkley  
The Honorable Sanford Bishop  
The Honorable Jeff Fortenberry