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September 27, 2019

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

I am deeply concerned about the lack of capacity at the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and the Economic Research Service (ERS) due to the Trump Administration's decision to relocate these agencies at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Over the past year, the Administration has repeatedly told Congress that the relocation would not affect capacity to administer research grants, conduct economic research, and carry out the critical missions of these two agencies.

With over 75% of reassigned employees opting not to relocate, on top of already high vacancy rates, the relocation has left these agencies with little ability to do their important work. Thus far, only eight newly hired ERS employees and one NIFA employee are working in Kansas City. Of particular concern, only 9 percent of current NIFA employees in the Office of Grants Management have agreed to relocate to Kansas City.

It is clear that the lack of capacity is affecting Farm Bill implementation. Just days before the end of the 2019 fiscal year, funding has not been awarded for several research programs, including the Specialty Crops Research Initiative, Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative, Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program, and the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, all of which have mandatory funding through the Farm Bill.

Several grant applicants have been notified that they will receive an award, but have not yet received funding, which is delaying their critical work. While the Department recently told my staff that these funds will be obligated no later than October 1, 2019, many of these funds have not yet been distributed to grantees, and stakeholders are concerned that FY2019 funding could be delayed until January 2020. It is imperative that the Department award these grants quickly. Additionally, it is essential that there is adequate capacity at NIFA to carry out the FY2020 grant cycle.

I am also concerned about ERS's ability to do its important work given the staffing shortages. While the Department recently told my staff that the relocation would not delay ERS reports, a recent news article revealed that dozens of reports are in danger of missing scheduled issuance dates. According to the article, ERS will be "unable to provide the same level of breadth and depth in its economic research and analysis as it did in the past" because of staffing shortages.¹ Another press article stated that 38 reports may be delayed, including monthly season average commodity

¹E&E NEWS, Relocation- driven USDA staff shortages could delay data September 19, 2019

price forecasts that are used by the World Agriculture Outlook Board and by farmers to help manage their price risk.²

The Department seems to recognize the impact of staffing shortages and recently offered extensions to some employees. While I appreciate the effort, it is too little too late for many employees as the USDA granted those extensions only a couple weeks before employees were supposed to relocate or face termination. Additionally, it is unclear why the Department did not offer these extensions to all ERS and NIFA employees.

The Department recently told my staff that in the interim, it will hire back retired employees on a part-time basis and detail employees from other agencies to fill in the holes while they hire new employees. It seems counter-productive to terminate current employees to simply hire others back on a part time basis when the USDA already has enormously high vacancy rates. I request a thorough explanation of how the Department plans to fill its capacity for both NIFA and ERS. In addition, please provide answers to the following questions and supporting documentation by October 11, 2019.

1. Can you confirm that all FY2019 NIFA annual funding will be or has been obligated by September 30, 2019?
2. Will any FY2019 NIFA funding be returned to the Treasury instead of awarded to grantees?
3. Please provide a date by which you expect all FY2019 annual grants awarded through NIFA to be available to grant recipients. If you expect different dates for different NIFA programs, please provide a date for each program.
4. What planned reports has ERS postponed or cancelled since announcement of the relocation? Please provide a list of all such reports, the amount of time such reports will be delayed, and a list of all reports that have been cancelled.
5. How will you ensure that there is adequate capacity to timely and efficiently administer and award FY2020 NIFA grants?
6. How long will it take ERS and NIFA to rebuild a permanent workforce? Please explain in detail and provide an estimate of how many new employees will be on-boarded every quarter until full staffing is complete in each office of each agency.

Sincerely,



Debbie Stabenow
Ranking Member

² Politico Pro, USDA Expects 'Significant Delays' in Economic Research Report, September 24, 2019.