

Testimony of Elizabeth Brownlee, Crothersville, IN  
on “Examining the Impacts of Relocating USDA Research Agencies on Agriculture Research”  
before the House Agriculture Committee  
Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, and Research  
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First, I would like to extend my thanks to Chairwoman Plaskett, Ranking Member Dunn, and the Members of the Subcommittee for the invitation to testify here today. Thank you for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to provide a perspective on the importance of agricultural research and its importance for new and beginning farmers, such as myself.

**Nightfall Farm and the Hoosier Young Farmers Coalition**

I am Liz Brownlee. I operate Nightfall Farm in Crothersville, Indiana, with my husband, Nate. We are lucky to run our business on my family’s farmland, consisting of 250 acres of forest, pastures, and wetlands. This is our sixth season raising pastured livestock, and we practice rotational grazing to build healthy soils on our pastures. We sell meat to chefs and directly to consumers at farmers markets and through our community supported agriculture program. We are also both members of the National Young Farmers Coalition (Young Farmers) and National Farmers Union (NFU). We helped found the Hoosier Young Farmers Coalition, our local chapter of the National Young Farmers Coalition, and I now serve as President. The Hoosier Young Farmers Coalition is a group of young farmers and food advocates working to recruit, support, and promote young and beginning farmers throughout the state of Indiana. Our members raise vegetables, livestock, grain, and many other products to sell to both local and international commodity markets.

**New and Beginning Farmers**

As a beginning farmer, I am concerned about the impact to farmers and ranchers that may come with the relocation of the Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA), two key agencies producing research and administering programs that are critical to the success of the next generation. The relocation of ERS and NIFA will make it more challenging for farm groups to collaborate with these agencies and may jeopardize the ability of policy makers in Washington, DC to craft evidence-based, effective policy solutions for the next generation of farmers and ranchers.

Young and beginning farmers face serious obstacles to launching and growing their farm businesses. I grew up on my family’s farm, but from day one there was a clear message: you can’t make a living farming. My parents both grew up on farms and bought our 250-acre farm in 1971. They raised corn, beans, cattle, and hay until the early 1980s. In the 1980s farm crisis, they could not make the farm profitable, and started renting the land instead of farming it themselves. Although I was a 4-H member and an officer in Future Farmers of America (FFA), becoming a farmer was never discussed as a viable career option. Farms and small towns in Indiana were dying, not prospering. I was encouraged to get an education, and I assumed that I would leave Indiana when I became an adult.

Although the 1980s farm crisis has ended, I face different challenges from my parents' farming generation. The average age of a farmer is now 59, and farmers over 65 outnumber farmers under 35 by 6 to 1. Young farmers cannot find or afford farmland; student debt is compromising our ability to capitalize our businesses; adequate labor and staff are difficult to recruit; health insurance is unaffordable; and increasing severe and unpredictable weather make production more challenging than ever.<sup>8</sup> Federal and state policies are not adequately addressing our needs, and many young farmers are not accessing the programs designed to help.

The ability of Congress and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to respond to our challenges will only be delayed and made more difficult with the relocation of ERS and NIFA. Farmers and ranchers are often not working directly with these agencies, but have a stake in the work that they do. NIFA houses a number of key programs for beginning farmers such as the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP), the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Extension (SARE) grant program, and the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Advisory Committee. ERS is leading research critical to the agricultural economy, measuring the economic impacts of USDA conservation programs and demographic trends in rural America, to name a few. Their research will shape farming and farm policy for decades to come.

### **National Institute for Food and Agriculture Grant Programs**

Two grants administered by NIFA were instrumental in the creation of the Hoosier Young Farmers Coalition, the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) and a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education grant (SARE). These two programs helped build the Hoosier Young Farmers Coalition into a statewide network of farmers who can learn together to build better businesses, contribute to their local economies, and grow quality food for Indiana. We are working to make our communities in Indiana stronger, more vibrant, and healthier. The story of our Coalition's origin perfectly illustrates how NIFA programs are helping farmers and why NIFA is most effective when it is located in Washington, DC.

My husband and I started working on farms in Maine and Vermont, and we fell in love with farming. We decided to move home to Indiana, to put our new skills to work for our community. We knew it would be difficult to turn my family's corn and soybean fields into a thriving farm business, and we knew that the local food economy in Indiana was not as mature as those in the Northeast. But when we moved home, we quickly realized that our biggest need was for a community of sustainable farmer peers to share with and learn from. Without the NIFA programs to help build that community, our farm would not have prospered.

We found other beginning farmers in Indiana thanks in large part to a program funded by BFRDP. The grant funded a series of farm field tours, conferences, and other activities, where we met and learned from other beginning and experienced farmers. We learned about grazing practices, marketing strategies, and business plan development, all of which we have used on our farm. But more importantly, we quickly realized how many other beginning farmers were out there, running

thriving businesses across Indiana. We realized how much we needed this connection with other farmers, to learn together and from one another. Farmers learn best from their peers. As the BFRDP grant came to a close, we launched the Hoosier Young Farmers Coalition, a chapter of the National Young Farmers Coalition. Our goal was to create an ongoing community of farmers to continue to build our knowledge and Indiana's local food system.

The BFRDP grant still had funds available to help build farmer groups' capacity, and these resources made our chapter possible, in combination with a SARE grant, in 2017. BFRDP funds helped create our website, e-newsletter, and promotional materials. The grant also funded our first events and allowed us to bring beginning farmers together to learn and connect. Last but not least, BFRDP funds paid for our leadership team to set out a plan of action for how to build up the beginning farmer community in Indiana so that our farm businesses could thrive.

BFRDP and SARE have continued to be an asset to our chapter. Funds from those programs helped us lay a strong foundation. In our first year, we were able to organize almost 25 events and engage with over 800 Hoosier farmers. Today, we work with farmers across the state with a small board run by young farmers and ranchers. We host potlucks, farm tours, and policy round tables. We co-sponsor conferences where farmers gather and learn, and offer scholarships to other farming conferences. The BFRDP and SARE grants provide opportunities to beginning farmers to network with other farmers and learn skills to take back to the farm to improve their business. Most importantly, we are creating a space for farmers to find a sense of camaraderie as we build Indiana's food economy. BFRDP and SARE are two of the most critical farm bill programs for beginning farmers, because they are targeted at building the next generation.

We have also utilized SARE on our farm. Last year, my husband and I received a SARE Farmer-Rancher grant to examine the feasibility of opening a butcher shop to support farmers who sell directly to customers. Access to quality meat processing is a problem throughout the Midwest. We are partnering with nearby farmers and a chef, and hope to open the butcher shop in 2020. All of our research (floor plans, cash flow analysis, etc.) will be open source and available for other farmers to utilize in their own communities. NIFA helps make these grants a reality - but we never called NIFA. We worked with regional SARE staff to ask questions as we crafted our grant application, and recently, when they were doing site visits to learn from local grant recipients, it was local SARE staff who visited our farm, not NIFA staff from DC.

USDA has proposed that the relocation will move NIFA closer to the farmers, but I have seen firsthand how NIFA programs already have highly effective ways of working closely with farmers. For three years, I served on the Review Committee for the SARE Farmer-Rancher grant. I was one of about 25 farmers that helped select on-farm research projects from applicants across the Midwest. This is just one way that NIFA programs are already grounded in farming communities: farmers are selecting the applied research they need, by region. This system is highly effective, and does not require moving an entire USDA agency.

In fact, moving NIFA may make it harder for stakeholders to work with them. I do not regularly take the train to Washington, DC to testify in front of Congress or meet with USDA. I have too much to do on the farm, running our business. Even if NIFA and ERS were located in Indiana, I would not have the time for regular engagement with those agencies. That is why I am a member of the National Young Farmers Coalition and the National Farmers Union. They amplify my needs and my voice, along with other farmers from across the country, and work with NIFA, ERS, and the other agencies of USDA. This equation stops working if the NIFA and ERS offices are moved out of the national capital region. The farm organizations that I belong to, and others that I support, cannot simply establish a second or third office in Kansas City or even Indiana. That is inefficient and financially wasteful. That is especially true for groups that work with underserved farmers, including beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers, and these farmers need our voices heard by Congress and USDA. It is logical to keep these agencies in the nation's capital, where policy making happens, where farmer organizations have established offices, and where farmers like me can rest assured that sound research and policy work is happening.

### **Economic Research Service**

I am equally concerned about the relocation and realignment of ERS. Their mission is to anticipate trends and emerging issues in agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America and to conduct high-quality, objective economic research to inform and enhance public and private decision making. Currently, they are conducting research on beginning farmers and the transition of farm businesses to the next generation, as well as the barriers and challenges farmers face in finding and affording farmland. They also examine demographic shifts and how that impacts rural communities, as well as the efficacy of policies designed to protect the environment and combat climate change.

ERS is working on the challenges farmers and rural communities are facing now. This year, we have had to delay our grazing season by a month. The grass was green and ready for livestock, but the ground was too wet to move the animals from the barn to the pastures. Grain farmers in our area are weeks behind in planting because the fields have been too wet. While conservation programs can help to mitigate the impacts of severe and unpredictable weather, the research ERS does can help us better understand the most cost-effective methods to mitigate and adapt to a changing climate. These extreme weather events impact my finances, and my ability to plan to grow my business.

In many ways, I am an unusual beginning farmer, because I had access to my family's farmland when I wanted to start my business. According to the National Young Farmers Coalition 2017 Young Farmer Survey, many young farmers do not come from a farming family and do not have access to farmland. In fact, land access was the number one challenge reported by young farmers. In the 2018 Farm Bill, ERS was tasked by Congress to examine the barriers beginning farmers and farmers of color face in finding and affording farmland. They are also tasked with identifying how federal programs can reduce those barriers. If we want our rural communities to flourish, we need to make land affordable and accessible for new farmers, and we need to make sure all farmers and ranchers have access to federal farm bill programs. ERS plays a vital role in developing sound, evidence-based policy solutions for the challenges young farmers face. To complete this research, ERS will

need to work with farmers and ranchers all over the country, not just in Indiana, and primarily, with policymakers like yourselves.

Research on these topics is urgently needed, and it is needed by policy makers to design policies and programs that will impact my farm and my business for decades to come. I do not work directly with ERS, but Congressional staff, USDA, and many other federal agencies do. Relocating ERS and NIFA out of Washington, DC impacts the ability of these agencies to properly do their job, provide quality research to policy makers, and may jeopardize your ability to write farm policy that supports the next generation. Moving the agencies farther from policy makers will only create more silos and disconnects between the agencies and policy makers. It will also make it more difficult to coordinate with other departments, such as Education or Labor, that are end users of ERS and NIFA research products.

Numerous economists have already left ERS this year. With the lost institutional knowledge and staff capacity, it will be more challenging for these institutions to complete existing projects and start up new ones. In the year following the farm bill, USDA not only has the challenge of running programs, but also the challenge of writing new regulations and crafting new research projects as mandated in the bill. For instance, the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Advisory Committee has not met in over a year. This committee advises the Secretary of Agriculture about how to equip beginning farmers for success. Our country needs all parts of the USDA to function efficiently, but especially those impacting the next generation of farmers. Losing key staff will only slow down USDA's ability to provide quality research, so you, the policy makers, can help farmers like me.

### **Conclusion**

I, and farmers like me, do not need NIFA and ERS to be in the field in my community. I do need NIFA and ERS to be working tirelessly to produce the best research, products, and policy to support us in our mission to feed our communities. That work is best done in Washington, DC. As the agriculture industry continues to struggle with depressed prices, lost market share, and floods and severe weather, I believe it is critical for this Subcommittee and other Members in Congress to ensure USDA is creating sound science, working closely with all stakeholders, and addressing the urgent research needs to shape current and future farm bill policies. I need NIFA and ERS to be productive, efficient, and effective - and that means they need to be in our nation's capital, doing research that serves our nation's farmers. Thank you for taking the time to examine how the proposed relocation will impact farmers and ranchers, and allowing me the opportunity to testify today.

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<sup>i</sup> USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2017 Census of Agriculture.

<sup>ii</sup> National Young Farmers Coalition. Building a Future with Farmers II: Results and Recommendations from the National Young Farmer Survey. 2017.