

Testimony of William F. Tracy Ph.D., Madison, WI
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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Good morning Chairwoman Plaskett, Ranking Member Dunn, and Members of the subcommittee. Thank you for holding this hearing and for giving me the opportunity to provide my perspective on the impacts of relocating and reorganizing two U.S. Department of Agriculture research agencies, the Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). In my role here today, I am not speaking for the University of Wisconsin-Madison, but my views do reflect the thoughts of many of my colleagues around the country.

I am Bill Tracy and I have been a faculty member in the Department of Agronomy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison since 1984. I served as Chair of the Department of Agronomy for 14 years from 2004 to 2018, and as interim dean of the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. Prior to that I worked for private sector seed companies. At Madison, I teach a course in principles of crop production and a graduate level course in agroecology. My research area is plant breeding, genetics, and genomics of sweet corn, and I have developed varieties grown commercially on every continent. Over my career, I have frequently referred to publications and information distributed by ERS and have used their work in publications and classrooms. As an active agricultural researcher, I have also had numerous interactions with NIFA over the years and have received multiple NIFA grants.

We all recognize that US agriculture and farmers are under severe stress right now. In Wisconsin, we stand in disbelief as our friends and neighbors, good farmers, are losing their dairy farms - 25% in the last five years, 638 farms in 2018, and already 302 this year. The extreme weather events this year have been particularly devastating, as have commodity prices. But these problems are not due simply to extreme weather or trade policies. The world of agriculture and America's place in it are changing rapidly.

When I started teaching my course in 1985, I would say with pride that the US produced more than 50% of the world's corn and soybeans. Today we produce about 34%. This reduction is not because we are producing less, in fact, we are producing more than ever. The reduction is because our competitors are producing much, much more. We can't

produce our way out of this dilemma, and so in order to save our family farms and improve our environment we need more publicly-funded agricultural research. Not just production research, but economic research, utilization research, agroecological research, and more. I believe that the proposed relocation of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture and the relocation and reorganization of the Economic Research Service will diminish our agricultural research capacity at one of the most critical times in US agriculture in recent history.

Specific areas of concern.

1. The continued reduction in American food and agriculture public research capacity.

As reported in 2017, China has overtaken the United States as the top government funder of agriculture research. I have visited China a number of times over the last 15 years. The investments in agricultural research infrastructure and people is astonishing. They have created an agricultural research juggernaut. Simultaneously, the two USDA Budget proposals released during Secretary Perdue's tenure (FY2019 Budget and FY2020 Budget) proposed significant reductions to the USDA Research, Education, and Extension budget. ERS was hit particularly hard in the Administrations FY2020 Budget, with a proposed 30% cut to the overall ERS budget and a 52% cut to ERS staff years. Further, the USDA's science agencies have been chronically underfunded for many years. For example, in 2016 the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) only awarded 24% of the grant applications it received. A 2013 grant panel on which I served as panel manager could fund only 7 out more than 90 submitted proposals. Despite this, the scientists and staff continue to provide great service to the American people. It is entirely unclear how a relocation that will cost both time and money will improve the ERS or NIFA, particularly when resources for both are already stretched so thin. Indeed, the reason I agreed to come here is that I believe, as do many of my colleagues, that moving NIFA and ERS would harm US agricultural research and reduce the vital services that they provide to US farmers and eaters.

2. The reduction in service and information exchange with other agencies, constituents, and farmers.

Communication with other agencies: As mentioned above, in my role as a public plant breeder and agricultural researcher, I have interacted frequently with NIFA staff. I have received funding through various programs, including the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), the Specialty Crops Research

Initiative (SCRI), and the Organic Research and Extension Initiative (OREI). I have also received grants from the National Science Foundation (NSF) and many of my agricultural colleagues receive grants from the National Institute of Health (NIH), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Department of Energy (DOE). All of these agencies and departments have specific mandates and responsibilities, but they often work on overlapping issues, in a synergistic way, producing novel solutions to challenges that farmers face on a daily basis. All of this collaboration contributes to publicly-funded agriculture research being at the forefront of solutions to modern challenges. Yet it is easy to see that if NIFA was moved out of the National Capital Region this collaboration could be severely limited. For example, NIFA could not as easily participate in White House or interagency meetings related to science and agriculture. This would result in NIFA – and consequently millions of farmers, research, and eaters - losing their place at the table.

Furthermore, the data generated by NIFA and ERS, especially ERS, is critical to the work of other government agencies, to Congress, researchers, industry, and to farming organizations. Scientists rely on this data for understanding problems, and predicting needs and trends that inform our priorities. There is substantial concern that this relocation will dramatically decrease staff capacity to carry out this important work.

In summary, coordination and collaboration with other agencies and departments, including statistical agencies, is essential to NIFA and ERS's work. These collaborations will be difficult and expensive to accomplish if these agencies are relocated outside the National Capital Region.

Communication with constituents and farmers: NIFA and ERS work with other agencies as mentioned above, but also with non-federal researchers, NGOs, advocacy groups, farm groups, and basically anyone who wants to contact them.

Over the years I have been involved in the NIFA granting process, as have many colleagues. Often, to inform USDA agencies or groups of key agricultural priorities, groups will organize conferences in Washington, DC to discuss critical research needs. When I have been involved in such conferences, we have invited farmers and other non-researchers from throughout the country, so that their voices could be heard. We also invite researchers and managers from relevant federal agencies as well as Members of Congress so that everyone who wishes to participate can be at the table.

These meetings are very valuable in that diverse perspectives are shared and important contacts are made. Most organizations, businesses, and universities don't have the resources to fly to various parts of the country to meet with different federal governmental staff, especially if they wish to fund farmer trips. Relocation would make it difficult for agricultural organizations and businesses to efficiently meet with multiple agency staff and decision makers in the National Capital Region, thus limiting communications and in many cases cutting off a critical feedback loop.

- 3. Perceived Regional Biases and Politicization of ERS:** Having had the honor of serving as an AFRI grant panel manager (the person who chooses other panelists and assigns proposals for review), I know first hand how hard the national program leaders work to make sure that is no hint of bias or favoritism. This is not just toward research proposals from colleagues of panelists, but making sure there is no hint of bias regarding national regions, states, ethnic diversity, and other factors. This is very important and I admire the effort to keep things as fair as possible.

There are marked differences in agricultural production across the U.S. By moving the agencies outside Washington some types of agriculture may be favored over others when it comes to research and funding. Even favoritism is untrue it is likely that some will see bias. Keeping the agencies in Washington helps ensure prioritization of all types of agricultural research and maintains trust in the fairness of the granting process.

Furthermore, while this hearing is primarily focused on the physical relocation of ERS and NIFA – it is important to note the politicization of agriculture research that could result from moving ERS to the Office of the Chief Economist (OCE). Moving ERS into the OCE within the Office of the Secretary would have lasting and negative impacts on scientific and statistical integrity and runs contrary to the 1994 USDA Reorganization Act.

- 4. The loss of institutional knowledge and highly qualified staff at NIFA and ERS.** The scientists and staff I know are professional, hard-working, and committed to the missions of ERS and NIFA. They have tremendous institutional knowledge and an understanding of how to provide the best service they can to

the farmers, citizens, and constituents. It is my understanding that the reorganization proposal has already caused staff to leave USDA in significant numbers. While I don't know any one personally who has left, I do know many people are under a great deal of stress due to the unknown and due to the fact that they are working in low-staffing conditions and with low staff morale. I think it is very unfortunate that dedicated public servants have to undergo these conditions when, to my knowledge no one has provided data on how these agencies and their farmers would benefit from this move.

To summarize: I see serious downsides of the proposal to move NIFA and ERS out of the National Capital Region. I am very concerned about the diminishment of the voice of the agricultural research community in the National agenda, and I am very concerned about the potential for regional biases hurting the NIFA's standing in the community. At that same time, I have heard no compelling justification or benefit by following through on this plan. Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to answering your questions.