Dear Chairmen Hoeven, Aderholt, Roberts and Conway, and Ranking Members Merkley, Bishop, Stabenow and Peterson:

USDA’s Secretary Sonny Perdue has announced plans to move two agencies of the Research, Education and Economics (REE) Mission Area outside of the national capital region (NCR). They are the Economic Research Service (ERS) and National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA), both outstanding research organizations. Staff of the NIFA and ERS are to be moved out of Washington DC to a yet to be determined location and the ERS is to be moved from the Research, Education and Economics Mission Area to be located under the Office of the Chief Economist. Grave concerns exist among stakeholders over these changes. We write on behalf of the undersigned stakeholder groups to oppose these plans.

The Secretary has claimed difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff; high costs of operations in the national capital region, and moving USDA resources closer to many stakeholders, as reasons for the move; however, no data has been provided to validate any of these concerns.

Most NIFA staff is currently located in leased space in the NCR. It is understood that the lease on current space is expiring. If so it is appropriate to explore options relative to needed space; however, to maintain the effectiveness of the agencies location options within the NCR should be given priority. Dr. Sonny Ramaswamy, immediate past director of NIFA, has indicated significant concern with the proposal in a public interview and
also indicated that recruiting and retaining staff were not major problems during his tenure. It has been noted that the DC area is one of the best places in the nation for dual career households, many potential recruits are a part of such households and this will be even more common in the future.

Primary concerns with the announced plans include:

1. **Maintaining resources, both monetary and staffing, for the agencies:** The administration has proposed budget cuts of 48% for ERS in FY 2019 President’s Budget. We appreciate that Congress has currently rejected those cuts, but if staff is moved away from the NCR existing funding levels for both agencies will be more difficult to maintain. Relative to staffing, while current staff members may be offered the opportunity to retain their positions, in the new location the forced relocation of staff from the NCR is certain to result in the loss of significant numbers of experienced, well qualified agency staff and support personnel, resulting in lower efficiency and productivity. If positions are subsequently filled to replace those who do not move, care must be taken to assure that new staff hiring is not influenced by politics.

2. **Maintaining and building networks:** The interaction of NIFA Administrators and program leaders with personnel from other USDA agencies as well as agencies outside of USDA such as FDA, EPA, the Department of Energy, NSF and others is critical to planning and meeting future research needs. Interaction with stakeholders is vital to identifying research needs. Both are facilitated by being located in the NCR so they are in proximity to the other agencies and so that stakeholders can meet with key NIFA personnel on the same visit in which they meet with personnel from other agencies.

3. **Maintaining the integrity of NIFA:** NIFA is primarily a national granting agency rather than research agency. To maintain the respect and trust of stakeholders and the general public in the funding decision they make it is critical that NIFA be recognized as independent and unbiased. It is important to be in a location that is easily accessible to all and also that there be no perception of favoritism relative to the granting process. Being located in the NCR facilitates contact with the agency by interested parties and minimizes potential perceptions of conflict of interest with potential grantees.

4. **Maintain and strengthen the integrity and independence of ERS as a statistical agency:** USDA’s ERS, along with NASS, is one of the two agencies at USDA that are designated by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as “principal statistical agencies.” It is imperative that the ERS is—and as importantly is perceived to be—an independent agency whose work is respected widely. We are concerned the move out of Research, Education, and Economics (REE) to a more policy-oriented part of USDA will jeopardize ERS’s autonomy in this regard. For this reason and to take full advantage of ERS’s synergies with the other REE agencies, we urge ERS remain in REE. Regardless of the ultimate decision, we urge the protections of ERS as an independent agency be strengthened. It is imperative the ERS Administrator is protected from improper outside influence. Further, the Administrator should be a person with unimpeachably excellent economic research credentials.

To address these concerns we ask that you:

1. Take immediate action to stop the imminent relocation of NIFA and ERS personnel from the NCR.
2. Issue a call for input on proposed restructuring of ERS and staff office options for NIFA and ERS within the NCR with a minimum of a 90 day comment period.

Thank you for your consideration. We need to work together to maintain a strong and effective national research effort.

Sincerely,

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