September 20, 2023

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow  
Chairwoman  
Senate Agriculture Committee  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Glenn Thompson  
Chairman  
House Agriculture Committee  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Boozman  
Ranking Member  
Senate Agriculture Committee  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable David Scott  
Ranking Member  
House Agriculture Committee  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, Chairman Thompson, and Ranking Member Scott,

We, the undersigned scientists, believe that the next food and farm bill provides an opportunity to build a more sustainable and resilient US agriculture and food system. We write to respectfully request that the Senate and House Agriculture Committees increase funding for agricultural research programs in the upcoming legislation. Adjusted for inflation, annual public agricultural research and development (R&D) investments in the United States have declined by about one-third since peaking in 2002, dropping from $7.64 billion to $5.16 billion. The need for significantly increased public research investment has never been greater.

Farmers and ranchers are on the front lines of a deepening climate crisis — drought conditions are squeezing producers across the country, from Texas to Washington, Michigan and beyond; worsening floods across much of the California and New England have shrunk yields; and pests and disease are an evolving threat. At the same time, agricultural production accounts for approximately 10 percent of US heat-trapping emissions. Public agricultural research is the first step needed to put new tools and innovations in the hands of farmers to address these growing challenges and build resiliency. Through development of regionally relevant agricultural practices and cutting-edge technologies, publicly funded agricultural research can simultaneously improve food security, revitalize rural communities, protect farmers and ranchers’ livelihoods, and empower producers to mitigate climate change.

Unfortunately, the United States is underinvesting in public agricultural research, even as government spending in China, the European Union, and Brazil rises. Although private agricultural research spending is on the rise, the private sector prioritizes research with commercial applications, often leaving environmentally and socially beneficial research unaddressed and underfunded. Insufficient investment in public research in this country has resulted in tangible consequences: agricultural research and education...
facilities have billions in deferred maintenance; more than 69 percent of agricultural research and education facilities at land-grant universities are at the end of their useful life; and critical climate-related R&D, including development of better soil carbon monitoring tools and exploration of nascent practices to reduce methane and nitrous oxide emissions, is not happening at the needed scale.

Meaningful investments in US Department of Agriculture (USDA) research agencies and programs are long overdue. With increased funding, USDA research initiatives could accelerate the development, dissemination, and adoption of environmentally and economically beneficial innovations and practices, such as crop cultivars with deeper root systems, crop varieties that are high-yielding and drought-tolerant, methane-inhibiting cattle feed additives, and improved livestock grazing and soil management practices. Based on historical trends, each additional dollar of public agricultural research spending would also generate an average of $20 in benefits to the US economy.

Congress can put much-needed climate- and resilience-focused innovations into farmers’ hands by providing USDA programs and agencies with the resources to fund a diverse portfolio of projects. Multiple existing research programs and agencies consistently deliver breakthroughs but require increased funding to maximize their effectiveness. These include:

**Agricultural Research Service (ARS):** As the USDA’s chief scientific in-house research agency, ARS develops solutions to the highest-priority agricultural problems. ARS supports the Long-Term Agroecosystem Research Network, which coordinates research across 18 sites on the sustainable intensification of agricultural production, as well as a network of Climate Hubs that develop and deliver science-based, region-specific information and technologies to agricultural producers and natural resource managers to mitigate climate-related risks. ARS also supports organic research that can advance climate mitigation and adaptation goals.

**Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI):** The USDA’s flagship competitive grant program supports research on a wide range of crucial climate mitigation strategies. AFRI is a critical source of funding for a wide array of institutions, including land-grant colleges and universities. Currently, more than half of AFRI proposals deemed worthy by expert review panels go unfunded, simply because not enough funding is available.

**Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE):** As a regionally based and outcome-oriented competitive research program, SARE positions farmers and ranchers as the primary investigators and cooperators in sustainable agriculture research and education projects. SARE has supported cutting edge projects on topics such as conservation tillage, crop rotation, grazing management, and soil health.

**Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI) and Organic Transitions Program (ORG):** As the USDA’s primary competitive research programs dedicated to addressing critical challenges facing organic and transitioning-to-organic producers, OREI and ORG support projects that advance climate mitigation and adaptation goals. Projects have led to actionable findings related to crop rotation, cover crops, and integrated livestock-crop systems. Yet currently, fewer than one-third of proposals are funded.

**Sustainable Nutrition Science (SNS):** The emerging field of SNS—research at the intersection of agricultural production, climate change, soil health, and human health—should be a priority for funding projects supported by the USDA. Between 2016 and 2020, SNS projects received just 25 cents of every $1,000 in government research spending, and although the USDA recently
supported more projects in this area, additional funding is needed. Establishing SNS as a priority in the food and farm bill is a needed first step.

**Farmworker Health Research:** Farmworkers are exposed to health and safety risks from toxic pesticides, extreme heat, and dangerous work environments while performing the labor that underpins a US food and agriculture industry valued at $1.264 trillion in 2021. Yet federal agencies focused on agriculture and health are investing just $16.2 million a year in research and education on farmworker health, or roughly $6.75 per farmworker. The next food and farm bill should at least double the amount of funding for National Institute of Food and Agriculture to conduct work that directly engages farmworkers as partners in developing research and education priorities, with increased focus on climate-related risks and pesticide exposure and underrepresented populations with specific needs and vulnerabilities.

In addition to increasing the research capacity of these programs, more resources and coordination are needed for data management and integration within and across USDA research areas, disciplines, programs, and agencies. Ultimately, improved data management will help to illuminate larger trends and promote informed decision-making.

Bolstering US investment in agricultural research has never been more important. If our country is to meet its climate goals and build a resilient agricultural sector, farmers and ranchers will need access to the best tools, data, and technologies. This requires Congress to reaffirm US leadership in funding public agricultural research. We therefore urge you to support farmers and ranchers and protect the future of our food and agriculture system by reauthorizing and increasing funding for agricultural research programs in the upcoming food and farm bill.

Sincerely,

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<td>CA</td>
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<tr>
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Steve and Erica Davidson, Ph.D.
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Mason Deaver, M.A./M.S.
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Greg Wilson, M.A./M.S.
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Sequim, WA

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Mercer Island, WA

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