

# Department of Agriculture

*This memo outlines the ways in which the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) can ensure it is making science-based policy and program decisions during the next presidential term. Select priorities and steps the agency can take to effectively act on these issues in 2021 are identified.*

This memo outlines priorities for USDA to advance its scientific leadership and capacity during the presidential administration beginning in 2021. We recommend that administration officials develop a plan within the first 100 days for repairing and rebuilding the agency's Research, Education, and Economics (REE) mission area, especially the Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), given the staffing losses both agencies incurred due to their abrupt relocation in 2019. In addition, USDA must quickly invest substantial resources in research that helps ensure the sustainability and resiliency of our food and farm systems, especially given the urgency of climate change. This research should be informed by agroecology and social and systems science, and consider environmental, public health, and nutrition science, and the need to ensure food chain worker health and safety. Finally, REE research, as well as policy and program decisions, must be conducted in an inclusive way given the diversity of our food and farm systems.

These priorities are intended to offer a strong starting point for strengthening science and science-based policymaking at USDA in 2021. However, continued fidelity to these particular priority areas will be needed beyond 2021.

## Top Priorities for the Secretary of Agriculture

- Re-establish and advance the scientific capacity of ERS and NIFA. Also, ensure that REE agencies' science informs policy and is carried out without undue political interference.
- Within the REE mission area, prioritize research on how to enhance the sustainability and resilience of US farm and food systems. This research should include a focus on agroecology, systems and social sciences, and human nutrition science.

- Conduct an agency-wide assessment to evaluate the process and degree to which research and science effectively inform the agency's program and policy decisions.
- Increase the diversity of USDA's employees, program recipients, stakeholders, and scientific advisory committees. The agency should ensure that program and policy decisions are made in an inclusive way. This diversity includes, but is not necessarily limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, geography, interest group, scientific discipline, and sector (such as industry, academia, and non-governmental organizations).

## Key Appointment Positions

- Deputy Secretary
- USDA Inspector General
- USDA Chief Economist
- Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services
- Undersecretary for Food Safety
- Undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment
- Undersecretary for Research, Education and Economics (Chief Scientist)
- Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights

## Day-One Actions

- Announce a review of the previous administration's rulemaking and other policy decisions to identify any and all that were not evidence-based and revise or alter such decisions. Required actions will include:
  - Revoking or reversing any proposed or final rules issued in previous presidential terms that reduced or would reduce participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), since evidence consistently indicates that the program is effective at alleviating food insecurity. This is especially important given the current economic downturn due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Actions for the First 30 Days

- Return science-program leadership positions to Washington, DC, where people who fill them can best interact with and inform policymakers in accordance with their mission.
- Ensure that ERS remains under the purview of the REE mission area. This will help ensure that the USDA secretary and the Office of the Chief Economist are respecting the organizational firewall between ERS and the Office of the Secretary.
- Review the previous administration's rulemaking and other policy decisions to identify any and all that were not evidence-based and revise or alter such decisions. Required actions will include:
  - Ensuring that evidence-based child nutrition meal standards consistent with dietary guidelines are being implemented in the National School Lunch Program. Again, this is critically important during the COVID-19 pandemic since so many additional families are relying on these meals to meet their food needs.
  - Establishing evidence-based dietary guidelines and implementing them consistently across USDA nutrition programs with the goal of improving nutrition education, sustainability, and health and well-being for all people.
  - Revoking or reversing all “line speed waivers” granted to meat and poultry plants in 2019 and 2020. Withdraw the final rule on swine slaughter inspection and suspend all work on any rules increasing line speeds at meat and poultry plants. These changes are important because meat and poultry plant workers are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. One potential rationale for these reversals, withdrawals, and suspensions is that the actions did not adhere to the requirements set forth in the agency Information Quality Activities Guidelines data presentation and transparency requirements.

## Actions for the First 100 Days

- Develop a plan to rebuild and advance REE science capacity that defines the agencies' major strategic and tactical goals for the upcoming years, assesses talent and

trends impacting availability of needed expertise, analyzes the current state of function of the agencies, conducts a gap analysis, and develops a plan for implementing program or policy changes.

- In the president's fiscal year 2022 budget request to Congress, request funding that allows ERS and NIFA administrators to quickly hire back staff so they can, at minimum, operate at their pre-relocation capacities. In addition, provide additional support and opportunity for administrators to advance overall staff capacity, particularly to add capacity for urgently needed research areas, such as on agroecology, interdisciplinary social science, and climate change, as much as possible. This could include additional full-time equivalents for recruitment or additional administrative human resource capacity.
- Across REE agencies, prioritize climate change mitigation and adaptation agricultural research, which spans disciplinary boundaries and includes agroecological, applied economics, integrated human nutrition science and policy, and systems science principles. For example, USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) can devote more resources to researching agricultural practices that enable farmers and ranchers to both mitigate heat-trapping emissions and increase resilience to extreme weather events and other disturbances caused by climate change.
- In the president's fiscal year 2022 budget request, seek increases in discretionary funding for USDA's REE mission area, especially for NIFA's Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) and the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program. Given the importance of AFRI and SARE for identifying and improving tools and practices that help farmers achieve sustainability and resilience, the administration should propose budget increases for both of these programs in its fiscal year 2022 budget request. Furthermore, within these grant programs, increase funding for urgently needed research. Specifically, research that applies principles from agroecology, systems science, and social science should be prioritized. A balance of relatively smaller and larger grants is needed to support both exploratory and more complex field-based research. Additionally, larger grants are needed to support long-term research, particularly for understanding diversified farming systems (e.g., multi-crop rotations) and the long-term impacts of climate and management changes.

- Request funding in the president's fiscal year 2022 budget for the USDA's Climate Hubs and Long-Term Agroecosystem Research Network, which could each provide a strong foundation for much-needed, regionally focused science in the years to come.
- Ensure that non-industry stakeholders are engaged in USDA policy and program decisions, especially in decisions about intramural and extramural research. These non-industry stakeholders could include academic or non-academic research institutions, nonprofit organizations, and organizations that represent farmers or other food system stakeholders, as well as women, Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color, among others.

## Actions for the First Year

- Ensure that ERS and NIFA analyses and research continue to inform the federal policymaking process.
- The USDA's SARE program, which offers farmer-driven grants and programming, should increase its emphasis on climate change mitigation and adaptation. Through its Education and Outreach and Professional Development programming, SARE could improve farmer access to knowledge and resources to build climate resilience.
- Use USDA data collection instruments—such as the Census of Agriculture or the Agriculture Resource Management Survey (ARMS)—to collect more information on the prevalence of agricultural practices that can mitigate heat-trapping emissions or that help farmers adapt to climate change, including practices that preserve soil health (such as cover crops, agroforestry, perennials, and conservation crop rotations).
- Create a public breed and cultivar research coordinator position within the REE mission area. This will ensure that USDA can continue to maintain and build a diversity of crops and livestock breeds with climate-adaptive and other beneficial traits that are broadly accessible to all US farmers.
- Conduct an agency-wide evaluation of the processes and degree to which science and evidence enter into agency decisionmaking and policy positions.
- In addition to evaluating the process by and degree to which program and policy decisions are evidence-based, USDA should evaluate the processes by and extent to

which the public can participate or engage in agency decisionmaking. It should also evaluate the costs or benefits incurred by specific populations who are impacted by program or policy decisions.

- Evaluate NIFA's capacity to serve the 1890 and 1994 land-grant institutions (the Tribal Colleges and Universities) and the Hispanic-Serving Agricultural Colleges and Universities.
- Increase emphasis on diversity in evaluating applicants for USDA federal advisory committees (such as the National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board). In particular, prioritize applicants who individually or through their organizational affiliation represent farmers who are women, Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, Asian, or part of other racial and ethnic groups that identify as non-White.
- Increase funding and resources for the USDA civil rights division to ensure that historic inequities in policy and program decisions are addressed and/or corrected.
- Invest in research that evaluates the links between soil, plant, animal, and human health.

## Priority 1: Re-Establish and Advance the Scientific Capacity of ERS and NIFA and Ensure that REE Agencies' Science Informs Policy and Is Carried Out without Undue Political Interference

In 2018, Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue announced that he intended to relocate ERS and NIFA to a yet-to-be-determined location. At the same time, the secretary also announced as part of this plan that ERS would be reorganized, moving it out of the REE mission area and into the Office of the Chief Economist under the Office of the Secretary. Many advocates raised concerns about this particular proposal because it would expose ERS to more political influence.

After a lengthy site selection process, *the secretary announced on June 13, 2019*, that ERS and NIFA would be moving to Kansas City, Missouri. Employees were then required to decide whether or not to choose reassignment to the new location no later than September 30, 2019. *USDA announced* that it had signed a 15-year lease for office space in Kansas City on October 31, 2019. Since the relocation was first announced in 2018, both agencies lost approximately *75 percent of their staff* and have yet to rehire back the

majority of these positions. We encourage the administration to undertake the following actions as soon as possible.

### Administrative Actions

- Develop a plan to rebuild and advance REE science capacity that defines the agencies' major strategic and tactical goals for the upcoming years, assesses talent and trends impacting availability of needed expertise, analyzes the current state of function of the agencies, conducts a gap analysis, and develops a plan for implementing program or policy changes.
- Ensure that ERS and NIFA analyses and research continue to inform the federal policymaking process.
- Return science-program leadership positions to Washington, DC, where people who fill them can best interact with and inform policymakers in accordance with their mission.
- Ensure that ERS remains under the purview of the REE mission area. This will help ensure that the USDA secretary and the Office of the Chief Economist are respecting the organizational firewall between ERS and the Office of the Secretary.

### Budgetary Action

- In the president's fiscal year 2022 budget request to Congress, include funding that allows ERS and NIFA administrators to quickly hire back staff so they can, at minimum, operate at their pre-relocation capacities. In addition, provide additional support and opportunity for administrators to advance overall staff capacity, particularly to add capacity for urgently needed research areas, such as agroecology, interdisciplinary social science, human nutrition science and policy, and climate change, as much as possible. This could include additional full-time equivalents for recruitment or additional administrative human resource capacity.

## Priority 2: Within the REE Mission Area, Prioritize Research on How to Enhance the Sustainability and Resilience of US Farm and Food Systems

Agricultural systems in the United States produce among the highest yields of commodity crops globally. Yet food and agricultural production can degrade soil health, pollute air and

water, and harm farmers, farmworkers, and rural communities. In addition, while food security and diet are not fully determined by total agricultural output or yields, there are direct links between food production and human health that USDA must investigate more fully. Furthermore, there is scientific consensus that climate change amplifies many of these challenges and is, therefore, an urgent threat to the livelihood of farmers, and food and farm workers, as well as to the resilience of our global food and farm systems upon which US and global consumers rely.

To ensure that US agriculture remains competitive globally and can sustainably produce food, fuel, and fiber for many generations to come, USDA must quickly invest substantial resources, especially with the REE mission area, into research to address environmental, climate change, worker safety, and public health-related concerns such as human nutrition and food insecurity. We encourage the administration to prioritize the following actions under this priority area.

### Administrative Actions

- Across REE agencies, prioritize climate change mitigation and adaptation agricultural research, which spans disciplinary boundaries and includes agroecological, applied economics, integrated human nutrition science and policy, and system science principles. For example, ARS can devote more resources to researching agricultural practices that enable farmers and ranchers to both mitigate heat-trapping emissions and increase resilience to extreme weather events and other disturbances that are caused by climate change.
- The SARE program, which offers farmer-driven grants and programming, should increase their emphasis on climate change mitigation and adaptation. Through their Education and Outreach and Professional Development programming, SARE could improve farmer access to knowledge and resources to build climate resilience.
- Use USDA data collection instruments—such as the Census of Agriculture or ARMS—to collect more information on the prevalence of agricultural practices that can mitigate heat-trapping emissions or that help farmers adapt to climate change, including practices that preserve soil health (such as cover crops, agroforestry, perennials, and conservation crop rotations).
- Create a public breed and cultivar research coordinator position within the REE mission area. This will ensure that USDA can continue to maintain and build a diversity



of crops and livestock breeds with climate-adaptive and other beneficial traits that are broadly accessible to all US farmers.

- Invest in research that evaluates the links between soil, plant, animal, and human health.
- Establish inequities research programs at ERS and NIFA with two purposes: (1) to build a portfolio of research at ERS and NIFA on social and economic inequities across sectors of the food system (e.g., farming, farmworkers, food processing, distribution, consumer food choices) and (2) to improve minority-serving and capacity-building competitive programs.

### **Budgetary Action**

- Seek increases in discretionary funding for USDA's REE mission area, especially for the AFRI and SARE programs. Given the importance of AFRI and SARE for identifying and improving tools and practices that help farmers achieve sustainability and resilience, the administration should propose budget increases for both of these programs in its fiscal year 2022 request. Furthermore, within these grant programs, increase funding for urgently needed research. Specifically, research that applies principles from agroecology, systems science, and social science should be prioritized. A balance of relatively smaller and larger grants is needed to support both exploratory and more complex field-based research. Additionally, larger grants are needed to support long-term research, particularly for understanding diversified farming systems (e.g., multi-crop rotations) and the long-term impacts of climate and management changes.
- Request increased funding for the USDA's Climate Hubs and Long-Term Agroecosystem Research Network could also provide a stronger foundation for critical multiyear, regionally focused science.

### **Priority 3: Conduct an Agency-Wide Assessment to Evaluate the Process and Degree to Which Research and Science Effectively Inform the Agency's Program and Policy Decisions**

There is a great need to create a formal and consistent process across all of USDA's mission areas that ensures that rules, programs, and policy decisions are evidence-based. The administration should undertake the following priority actions.

### **Administrative Actions**

- Conduct an agency-wide evaluation of the processes and degree to which science and evidence enter into agency decisionmaking and policy positions.
- Review the previous administration's rulemaking and other policy decisions to identify any and all that were not evidence-based and revise or alter such decisions. Required actions will include:
  - Revoking or reversing any proposed or final rules issued during previous presidential terms that reduced or would have reduced SNAP participation, since evidence consistently indicates that the program is effective at alleviating food insecurity. This is especially important given the current economic downturn due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
  - Ensuring that evidence-based child nutrition meal standards consistent with dietary guidelines are being implemented in the National School Lunch Program. Again, this is critically important during the COVID-19 pandemic since so many additional families are relying on these meals to meet their food needs.
  - Establishing evidence-based dietary guidelines and implementing them consistently across USDA nutrition programs, with the goal of improving nutrition education, sustainability, and health and well-being for all people.
  - Revoking or reversing all "line speed waivers" granted to meat and poultry plants in 2019 and 2020, as well as withdrawing the final rule on swine slaughter inspection and suspending all work on any rules increasing line speeds at meat and poultry plants. These changes are important because meat and poultry plant workers are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. One potential rationale for these reversals, withdrawals, and suspensions is that the actions did not adhere to the requirements set forth in the agency Information Quality Activities Guidelines data presentation and transparency requirements.
- Improve coordination across USDA agencies to ensure programs and policies are synergistic and not working at cross purposes. This could be achieved by establishing an agency-wide task force to evaluate where policies or programs might be working at odds with one another and then determining what type of administrative actions could help to better align policies and programs across the agency.

## Priority 4: Increase the Diversity of USDA's Employees, Program Recipients, Stakeholders, and Scientific Advisory Committees

The US food and agricultural system is not monolithic. The system and sectors within it vary by geographic region, by predominant crop grown, by scale or style of production, and by many other characteristics. Likewise, the challenges and obstacles that different sectors, communities, and individuals face within our food and agricultural system are diverse and distinct. Consequently, USDA's staff—and those with whom it engages and consults to make program and policy decisions—must be diverse to ensure that multiple perspectives inform and have influence over the agency's decisions.

### Administrative Actions

- In addition to evaluating the process and the degree to which program and policy decisions are evidence-based, USDA should evaluate the processes and extent to which the public can participate or engage in agency decision-making. It should also evaluate the costs or benefits incurred by specific populations who are impacted by program or policy decisions.
- Evaluate NIFA's capacity to serve the 1890 and 1994 land-grant institutions (the Tribal Colleges and Universities) and the Hispanic-Serving Agricultural Colleges and Universities.
- Ensure that public and private sector stakeholders are equally engaged in USDA policy and program decisions, especially in decisions about intramural and extramural research. These non-industry stakeholders could include academic or non-academic research institutions, nonprofit organizations, and organizations that represent farmers or other food system stakeholders as well as women, Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color.
- Increase emphasis on diversity in evaluating applicants for USDA federal advisory committees (such as the National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board). In particular, prioritize applicants who, individually or through their organizational affiliation, represent farmers who are women, Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, Asian, or part of other racial and ethnic groups that identify as non-White.
- Increase funding and resources for the USDA civil rights division to ensure that historic inequities in policy and program decisions are addressed and/or corrected.

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