

May 7, 2014

The Honorable Mark Pryor
Chairman, Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration Appropriations
Subcommittee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Ranking Member, Agriculture, Rural
Development, Food and Drug Administration
Appropriations Subcommittee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Pryor and Ranking Member Blunt,

We are writing you to encourage your support for the statistical agencies within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for Fiscal Year 2015 (FY15). The Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Agriculture Statistics Service (NASS) produce data and information essential to agricultural commodity and food markets and related sectors of the economy. Market volatility and related uncertainty significantly increase in the absence of government-managed and produced statistics. These agencies provide the United States (U.S.) an important edge against the increasingly global competition. Their work keeps the U.S. agricultural data information system second to none, worldwide. As a result, ERS and NASS programs not only have impact at the farm gate, but throughout national and international food, feed, fiber, and fuel economies.

We, the undersigned organizations, encourage you to consider funding these critical agencies at levels slightly above their FY15 request levels in order for them to continue providing essential information to farm and agribusiness, government agricultural program, and food policy decision makers. **Support at \$85.5 million for ERS and \$183 million for NASS, with \$48 million allocated for the Census of Agriculture will avoid unwanted shocks to the marketplace because of subpar information and data.**

The USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) would see an absolute increase of \$5 million under the President's FY15 budget. However, the FY15 request includes a transfer of responsibility from the General Services Administration (GSA) to ERS for administrative and lease programs previously managed by GSA via USDA administrative offices. The result would therefore be a net *decrease* of \$2 million dollars for the agency.

Likewise, \$8.5 million of the NASS increase would go toward decentralization of the GSA's rent account. With the remaining \$9.5 million increase, NASS will launch a series of new USDA priority initiatives, including two bee surveys and a geospatial data program. This may mean that some of the commodity-specific programs NASS reinstated in 2014 could be cut again in 2015. According to the recently released 2012 Ag. Census figures, the U.S. economy had a total of \$134 billion in *net* cash income, the largest recorded amount in the history of the U.S. thus far.¹ To continue to build future capacity in an increasingly competitive marketplace, the U.S. must invest in and leverage all of its strengths, including the food and agricultural data and information system.

The services of both ERS and NASS were cut significantly in FY13, leading to suspension, aggregation, and even elimination of data and statistical series critical for understanding or alleviating market risk. Since FY13, both agencies have taken a critical look at their data and information products, a reassessment that led to discontinuation of updates for several data series and/or a reduction in the level of geographic detail for other data.

¹ <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/farm-income-and-wealth-statistics/net-cash-income.aspx#.UzBQelfNm2V>

Additionally, since FY13, NASS has centralized a significant number of its processes, creating a renewed business model we find indeed ‘focuses on providing relevant solutions’ for challenges to U.S. agriculture, food, and resource economies. We acknowledge and greatly appreciate your support in FY14, which recognized the agencies’ efforts in taking essential austerity measures. While the FY14 appropriation level did not recover all lost programs, the agencies did reinstate several significant ERS programs and valuable agricultural estimates from NASS while avoiding further cuts. Still, FY14 levels of ERS funding remain five percent below those in FY11.

Today, ERS and NASS are both experiencing increased demand for their products and services. Examples of the valuable information provided by ERS include analysis of rural community characteristics, farm income, food and nutrition assistance programs, food consumption factors and food price forecasts, and projections of U.S. and world agricultural production, consumption, and trade. USDA ERS has the only source of data on food availability measuring the nation’s food supply—an essential aspect of national security. Additionally, ERS and NASS jointly sponsor the Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS) database, which is the only national survey that provides observations of field-level farm practices, the economics of the farm business, and the characteristics of American farm households.

The statistics curated and managed by NASS provide information indispensable to marketplace stability and efficiency. The FY15 request includes support for the agency’s quinquennial U.S. Census of Agriculture. The Ag. Census provides a valuable perspective on agriculture that stems from the local level (county) and spans to state and federal levels. The Ag. Census reports agricultural data for each congressional district that includes indices related to the 1) average value of agricultural products sold per farm in each state, 2) the percent increase/decrease of farms and 3) crop-specific images for state and national interest. These three examples only skim the top of the valuable pool of information that the Ag. Census provides.

We recognize the need for fiscal constraint, but also encourage you to consider reinforcing and building upon programs that will continue to assist in the recovery of the U.S. economy. Agriculture’s contribution to the annual trade surplus, a significant part of our economic recovery, is in part due to the information available in the marketplace. Statistical information is a vital component in assuring that USDA continues to meet our agricultural needs in feeding Americans, growing rural America, and in increasing the U.S.’s competitive edge related to global trade. We urge you to sustain these two statistical agencies at more than the requested amount as you consider FY15 appropriations.

If you have any specific questions with regard to agricultural products in your state, please contact any of our organizations individually or collectively (at agricultural.statistics@gmail.com), ERS, or NASS. Thank you in advance for your thoughtful consideration of this information.

Sincerely,

Agricultural & Applied Economics Association
American Sociological Association
American Statistical Association
Association of Academic Survey Research
Organizations
Association of Public Data Users
Biotechnology Industry Organization
Consortium of Social Science Associations
Council of Professional Associations on Federal
Statistics

Global Cold Chain Alliance
International Association of Refrigerated
Warehouses
National Coalition for Food and Agricultural
Research
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
Southern Agricultural Economics Association
The Fertilizer Institute
Western Agricultural Economics Association