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August 17, 2018

The Honorable John Hoeven
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies,
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jeff Merkley
Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Hoeven and Ranking Member Merkley:

The Rural Sociological Society (RSS) is a professional social science association that promotes the generation, application, and dissemination of sociological knowledge and scholarship that enhances the security of agriculture, rural families and communities, and the environment. Our research and scholarship provides an empirical basis for informed public policy, and advocacy. Since its founding in 1937, the RSS has traced changes in rural life and livelihoods, demography, community structures and economies, technologies, environmental conditions, and agriculture and food systems.

We the undersigned RSS past and present presidents are registering our deep concern over the August 9, 2018 announcement by the Secretary of Agriculture that the Economic Research Service (ERS) would be moved out of USDA's research division, and that both the ERS and the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA) will be relocated out of the Washington DC metropolitan area by the end of 2019. We register our concern as leaders and members of the RSS, and as scholars with a deep and abiding commitment to the generation of timely, empirical research knowledge of relevance to the wellbeing of rural people, communities and environments.

The reorganization and realignment of ERS and NIFA follows the Administration's FY 2019 budget request to cut the ERS budget by 48 percent. This announcement was justified by the arguments that this reorganization would result in cost-savings and greater efficiencies, a more effective ERS, and that the reorganization would place ERS and NIFA in closer proximity to its stakeholders. However, as an Association with multiple and long-standing ties to ERS, these justifications ring false. We fear this reorganization, should it go through, will marginalize ERS

and NIFA, and significantly undermine their capacity to generate knowledge of critical importance to agriculture and rural America.

Most immediately this reorganization will represent in many cases a likely non-resolvable dilemma for ERS and NIFA staff and their families. This is especially true for those at the senior levels who have worked for ERS and NIFA for decades and have developed deep familial and social roots in the Washington metropolitan area, and ERS and NIFA families whose children attend schools in the area. Moreover, many ERS and NIFA staff live in dual-earner households and must contemplate disrupting complicated employment arrangements that have been secured through long and hard work. The relocation of ERS out of the Capital Area will inevitably result in a large number of resignations and premature retirements. This loss of talented staff will significantly undermine the ERS' capacity to produce rigorous, timely and trusted analysis of challenges facing agriculture and rural America.

We further take issue with the assertion that a relocation of ERS and NIFA will place the work of these organizations closer to its "customers." In fact, the customers of ERS and NIFA research primarily include rural policy makers, elected and appointed officials at all levels of government, congressional staffers, agricultural businesses, the research community, and the public. These stakeholders consume the research either (predominantly) online or via staff briefings and meetings with others within the capital region, including those from the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Academy of Sciences, NIH and the Bureau of Labor Statistics and other organizations and institutions. A move will render meetings such as these impractical and/or costly.

Last, we want to object to the relocation of ERS from the USDA's research division to the Office of the Chief Economist (OCE). This has disturbing implications for the high-quality research conducted within the ERS by economists and other social scientists including geographers, demographers and sociologists. This realignment exposes ERS to substantial political interference and risks diminishing its credibility and legitimacy. Further, while the OCE has tended to produce more focused and shorter-term policy analysis, one of ERS's main strengths is its capacity to produce research that clarifies longer-term trends and issues affecting agriculture and rural America. The research, data and statistical resources associated with ERS must not be compromised. These data have also provided university (both land grant and non-land grant) researchers and other researchers outside of academia with curated datasets, further increasing the capacity to generate significant and timely research-based knowledge on rural America.

In summary, the Rural Sociological Society registers its strong opposition to:

- Reducing ERS's financial resources,
- Moving ERS and NIFA out of the Washington DC Capital Area, and
- Relocating ERS to the Office of the Chief Economist.

A strong ERS is not only vital to our professional association, but far more significantly to the ability of government at all levels to make informed and judicious decisions to the benefit of American agriculture and its rural people, places, and environments. In addition, relocating NIFA away from other key government research agencies would undermine its ability to coordinate its funding priorities and portfolio with allied programs at the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, and Department of Energy, among others. The announcement made regarding this reorganization does not reflect informed and judicious decision-making.

In appreciation for your attention to these concerns,

Sincerely,

Dr. Keiko Tanaka, Professor, University of Kentucky (President, Rural Sociological Society)
Dr. Kai A. Schafft, Associate Professor, Penn State University (RSS President-Elect)
Dr. Douglas Jackson-Smith, Professor, Ohio State University (2017-2018 RSS President)
Dr. Thomas Rudel, Distinguished Professor, Rutgers University (2016-2017 RSS President)
Dr. Leif Jensen, Distinguished Professor, Penn State University (2015-2016 RSS President)
Dr. E. Helen Berry, Professor, Utah State University (2014-2015 RSS President)
Dr. JoAnn Jaffe, Professor, University of Regina (2013-2014 RSS President)
Dr. Michael Schulman, Professor, North Carolina State University (2012-2013 RSS President)
Dr. Conner Bailey, Professor Emeritus, Auburn University (2011-2012 RSS President)
Dr. Joachim Singlemann, Dean's Distinguished Professor, University of Texas at San Antonio (2009-2010 RSS President)
Dr. Joe Molnar, Professor, Auburn University (2008-2009 RSS President)
Dr. Jess Gilbert, Professor Emeritus, University of Wisconsin, Madison (2007-2008 RSS President)
Dr. Richard Krannich, Professor, Utah State University (2006-2007 RSS President)
Dr. Carolyn Sachs, Professor Emeritus, Penn State University (2005-2006 RSS President)
Dr. Lionel "Bo" Beaulieu, Professor Emeritus, Purdue University (2003-2004 RSS President)
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