

October 9, 2018

The Honorable K. Michael Conaway
Chair, Committee on Agriculture
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Collin Peterson
Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Pat Roberts
Chair, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,
and Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairs Roberts and Conaway and Ranking Members Stabenow and Peterson,

Recently, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) proposed to move the Economic Research Service (ERS) out of the DC geographic area and place it organizationally under the Office of the Chief Economist. As one of the principal federal statistical agencies, ERS provides Congress, state and local governments, and the commodity community with critical research and data on agricultural and rural communities. Removing the agency from the Washington, DC, area poses risks to the quality and relevance of the information ERS produces.

As former senior administration officials and heads of statistical agencies invested in informing evidence-based policy decisions, our primary concerns are the following:

1. Retaining staff expertise

While current professional staff members will be offered the opportunity to retain their positions, it is anticipated that many will not move. ERS has already lost a respected and effective administrator. Staff attrition will dilute valuable organizational knowledge and expertise and damage established networks, even if newly vacated positions are filled.

2. Continuing valuable collaborations

ERS is one of the principal federal statistical agencies, all of which are in the DC area. ERS has an integrated approach to its broad research portfolio, in part due to its ability to collaborate. Locating it far from its collaborators, both within and outside the USDA, will severely limit its contributions to important activities such as the Agricultural Resource Management Survey, which is carried out in cooperation with the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

3. Maintaining visibility with policymakers

ERS currently responds efficiently and effectively to requests from Congress and other agencies. ERS provides timely and relevant economic research and analysis to inform

important policy decisions. Removing ERS from its proximity to key consumers means policy decisions may be made without the best analysis available, to the detriment of some of our nation's most vulnerable communities.

4. Risks to independence and credibility

The federal statistical agencies provide relevant, accurate, and timely information. Removing ERS from its position in the Research Education and Economics Mission Area to place it under the USDA chief economist jeopardizes its independence as a research agency and increases the potential for interference in the direction, design, analysis, and release of studies and reports. It threatens the independence and credibility necessary for a federal statistical agency to function objectively.

ERS is ranked as number three in the world of institutions in the field of agricultural economics, a reflection of our leadership in economic research. This proposal puts a world-renowned research agency at risk and could set back the federal statistical system at a time when the United States should be leading the world in innovation. In closing, we urge you to keep ERS in the Research Education and Economics Mission Area within the USDA and to keep the agency in the Capital region.

Sincerely,

Katharine G. Abraham, Commissioner, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Oct. 1993 – Oct. 2001

Vincent Barabba, Director, U.S. Census Bureau, July 1973 – Nov. 1976, July 1979 – Jan. 1980

William Barron, Deputy Commissioner, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1983 – 1998; Deputy Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 1999 – 2002

Donald Bay, Administrator, National Agriculture Statistics Service, USDA, 1992 – 1999

William T. Boehm, Branch Chief, Food Economics, ERS, USDA; Senior Economist, Council of Economic Advisors, 1976 – 1981

Raymond R. Bosecker, Administrator, National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA, 1999 – 2008

Gale Buchanan, Chief Scientist and Undersecretary for Research, Education, and Economics, USDA, 2006 – 2009

Jack Buckley, Commissioner, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011 – 2013

Carol S. Carson, Director, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Commerce Department, 1992 – 1995

Kevin W. Concannon, Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services, USDA, 2009 – 2017

Lynda T. Carlson, Director, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2000 – 2012

Guy Caruso, Administrator, Energy Information Administration, 2002 – 2008

Cynthia Z.F. Clark, Administrator, National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA, 2008 – 2014

Neilson Conklin, Director, Market and Trade Economics Division, Economic Research Service, USDA, 1999 – 2008

Stephen R. Crutchfield, Assistant Administrator and Staff Analysis Coordinator, Economic Research Service, USDA, 2007 – 2016

Emerson J. Elliott, Commissioner, National Center for Education Statistics, 1984 – 1995

Martha Farnsworth Riche, Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 1996 – 1999

Philip N. Fulton, Associate Administrator, Economic Research Service, USDA, 2000 – 2005

John R. Gawalt, Director, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2012 – 2018

Erica Groshen, Commissioner, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011 – 2013

Hermann Habermann, Chief Statistician of the United States, U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 1988 – 1992

Jay Hakes, Administrator, U.S. Energy Information Administration, 1993 – 2000

George Hoffman, Associate Administrator, Economic Research Service, USDA, 1980 – 1984

Carol C. House, Deputy Administrator, National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA, 2006 – 2010

John R. Kort, Associate Administrator and Acting Administrator, Economic Research Service, USDA, 2008 – 2011

John Lee, Administrator, Economic Research Service, USDA, 1982 – 1993

James Lynch, Director, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010 – 2013

Tom Mesenbourg, Deputy Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 – 2013

Elsa Murano, Undersecretary for Food Safety, Food Safety and Inspection Service, USDA, 2001 – 2004

Steve Murdock, Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 – 2009

Richard Newell, Administrator, Energy Information Administration, 2009 – 2011

Susan Offutt, Administrator, Economic Research Service, USDA, 1996 – 2006

Gregory L. Parham, Assistant Secretary, Departmental Administration and Administrator, USDA, 2013 – 2017

Thomas Petska, Director, Statistics of Income Division, Internal Revenue Service, 2001 – 2009

Robin Picanso, Associate Administrator, National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA, 2014 – 2017

Susan Powers, Director, Statistics of Income, Internal Revenue Service, 2010 – 2014

Kenneth Prewitt, Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 1998 – 2001

Joe Reilly, Administrator, National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA, 2014 – 2016

Richard E. Rominger, Deputy Secretary, USDA, 1993 – 2001

Philip L. Rones, Deputy Commissioner, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2003 – 2011

William J. Sabol, Director, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014 – 2016

Fritz Scheuren, Director, Statistics of Income, Internal Revenue Service, 1980 – 1994

John A. Schnittker, Undersecretary and Deputy Secretary, USDA, 1965 – 1969

Jeffrey L. Sedgwick, Director, Bureau of Justice Statistics, United States Department of Justice, 2006 – 2008

Katherine Smith Evans, Administrator, Economic Research Service, 2007 – 2011

Edward J. Sondik, Director, National Center for Health Statistics, CDC/DHHS, 1996 – 2013

Angie Tagtow, Executive Director, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, USDA, 2014 – 2017

Michael R. Taylor, Administrator, Food Safety and Inspection Service and Acting Undersecretary for Food Safety, USDA, 1994 – 1996

John Thompson, Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 2013 – 2017

Robert L. Thompson, Assistant Secretary for Economics, USDA, 1985 – 1987

Laurian Unnevehr, Director, Food Economics, Economic Research Service, USDA, 2008 – 2012

Katherine K. Wallman, Chief Statistician of the United States, U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 1992 – 2017

Shirley Robinson Watkins, Secretary of Agriculture for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services, USDA, 1997 – 2001

James C. Webster, Assistant Secretary for Governmental and Public Affairs, USDA, 1977 – 1981

Kathryn Wilson, Deputy Undersecretary, Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services, USDA, 2015 – 2017

Catherine E. Woteki, Chief Scientist and Undersecretary for Research, Education, and Economics, USDA, 2010 – 2016