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USDA research service could be hampered

Your Turn
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Guest columnist

Pop quiz: What do you know about America's food?

- How much of each dollar spent goes to farmers?
- What role do food stamps (SNAP benefits) play when joblessness goes up?
- How much does the rise in U.S. farm productivity depend on using more inputs, like labor and chemicals?

The answers, which appear at the end of this essay, all come from the same source: The USDA Economic Research Service (ERS). After 27 years of teaching and researching the economics of U.S. food and agriculture, I remain amazed at how much of what we know about America's food comes from ERS research. Even private data services about U.S. agriculture rely on ERS data for its validity and objectivity. And ERS staff regularly brief Congress and federal agencies.

Besides informing the public, the ERS research also helps taxpayers. Its research has shown how farm programs can get more conservation and nutritional bang for the buck. As an agency, it has developed a reputation for neutrality, integrity and excellence in economic research.

The ERS and all it offers are suddenly at grave risk. On Aug. 9, Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue announced two changes that could cripple the quality and quantity of ERS research. These bureaucratic moves may sound arcane, but they threaten to undermine what we know about the economics of America's food.

Perdue announced first that the ERS is to move next month from the unit where all USDA research is conducted to the Office of the Chief Economist, who advises the Secretary of Agriculture. Second, most of the 300 ERS staff will be relocated outside Washington, D.C. The USDA has solicited bids by site selection consultants to help it figure out the new spot.

The risk of political manipulation of the ERS if it sits under the Secretary of Agriculture is troubling. Indeed, the rationale for moving it to the research directorate in 1994 was to ensure independent and unbiased research. Its analyses of markets, trade, and policy effectiveness have historically been objective and rigorous — but not always what the secretary wished to hear.

The subtler risk is that the secretary aims to weaken and shrink the ERS. The president's fiscal 2019 budget request called for cutting ERS appropriations by 48 percent while moving it into the Office of the Chief Economist. Neither the House of Representatives nor the Senate acquiesced. Both maintained or increased the ERS budget for FY2019.

The administration is now doing by fiat what it could not persuade Congress to do. Its plan to relocate ERS employees away from Washington is likely to trigger widespread staff resignations. Apart from the human consequences to employees at an agency known for its family-friendly policies, there is a bigger issue for the nation. Will the United States lose the critical mass of scientific expertise into the nation's agricultural, food, and rural economy?

The threats of politicizing and crippling the ERS are great.

Fortunately, Congress can help. The appropriations bills to finance the federal government for the fiscal year starting Oct. 1 forbid spending money without the approval of the Appropriations Committees of both houses if the USDA "relocates an office or employees" or "reorganizes offices, programs, or activities" (HR 3268 Section 717a).

Congress should review the plan to reorganize and relocate the ERS to determine whether these changes are in the best interests of the nation. Reorganization can be valuable, but only if designed carefully. A hasty move could irreversibly erode the integrity and capacity of the nation's food, agricultural and rural economic research. A biased or weakened ERS would harm the private and public decision processes that keep our food system strong and safe.

Answers to America's food questions:

1. 14.8 percent in 2016, according to the USDA-ERS Food Dollar Application.
2. SNAP benefit recipients increase by 2 million to 3 million people with each 1-percent rise in unemployment. SNAP benefits also stimulate the U.S. economy during recession.
3. U.S. agricultural productivity has grown at 1.48 percent annually since 1948 with virtually no change in the inflation-adjusted value of inputs.

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