

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 20, 2018

The Honorable Stephen Censky
Deputy Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
201 14th St SW
Washington, D.C. 20227

Dear Deputy Secretary Censky,

Thank you again for the discussion earlier this year regarding the ongoing staffing issues at the National Center for Agricultural Utilization Research (NCAUR) in the district. Unfortunately, it is our understanding that the hiring issues are persisting despite the passage of the FY18 full year appropriations. We are requesting, once again, that the Department immediately take steps to begin filling vacancies at that lab and to discontinue the harmful practice of basing staffing decision on rejected budget proposal. There are at least 25 research positions currently unfilled at the NCAUR. While the lab is able to operate its research mission with 223 full time employees, its current capacity is nearly 350. The hiring freeze is exacerbating resource and staffing challenges directly impacting agriculture research and the rural economy.

We have appreciated not only the opportunity for a dialogue with the Department on this issue, but also your continued engagement. As you know, the President's FY18 budget proposed the closure of a USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS) laboratory in Peoria, Illinois. In July 2017, the House Appropriations Committee funded the lab, and in doing so, explicitly rejected the Administration's proposed closure.

At a hearing to review the President's FY18 budget proposal, Secretary Perdue said, "I would admit to you today that I think research is one of those areas where we may have missed the mark ... because research is really the basis of our ag productivity today.

"I believe if American manufacturing had had the same level of basic research, applied research, and had a delivery system like the extension service, we wouldn't be talking about the demise of American manufacturing today. That's how strongly I believe in research ... and our ARS. I hope we can appropriately find the money to fund them."

That desire to fund ARS aligns with the USDA's 2018 Legislative Principles announced in January. Secretary Perdue emphasized the necessity for both "tools and resources necessary to attract and retain a strong USDA workforce" and also providing USDA "full authority to responsibly manage properties and facilities under its jurisdiction."

During your phone call with Congresswoman Bustos in February, 2018, you indicated that hiring at the NCAUR was effectively frozen due to the President's FY18 budget that proposed closing the lab. You further indicated that the effective blanket freeze in place at NCAUR would be lifted when Congress completed a full FY18 appropriations bill. However, though four weeks have passed since Congress completed that bill on March 23, 2018, it is our understanding that NCAUR still does not have the authority to fill vacancies.

Further, we are concerned that we have heard contradicting updates, including that the de facto hiring freeze remains in place. We believe it would be unacceptable for the Administration to continue the hiring freeze in light of consistent, clear instructions to the contrary.

Congress has repeatedly signaled to the Administration through our budget and through the appropriations process that the lab should continue its important work and we hope to see that reflected in the Administration's actions. In light of the ongoing low commodity prices, due in part to Administration actions that have threatened or limited both domestic and trade markets for our crops, it is even more important that we continue the research necessary to develop new products and new uses that can help create new market opportunities for our producers.

With this in mind, we again urge you to rapidly address these ongoing hiring issues at the lab. Further, please let me know what else we, and our colleagues in Congress, can do to make sure the NCAUR has the ability to advance the scientific innovation and excellence that drive and grow American agriculture and the economy.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.



Cheri Bustos
Member of Congress

Sincerely,



Darin LaHood
Member of Congress