October 24, 2017

The Honorable Mike Conaway  
Chairman  
House Committee on Agriculture  
1301 Longworth House Office Building  
U. S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Collin Peterson  
Ranking Member  
House Committee on Agriculture  
1010 Longworth House Office Building  
U. S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Conaway and Ranking Member Peterson:

The Board on Agriculture Assembly (BAA) of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) represents a national system that knits together more than 107 land-grant and 60 non-land-grant universities. Over our long partnership with the federal government, we are proud that investments in research and education at our public institutions have helped make U.S. agriculture the most productive in the world.

Now that Farm Bill reauthorization discussions are underway, we write to communicate our strong commitment to work with you to renew and strengthen U.S. agriculture investments in competitive and capacity agricultural research, Cooperative Extension, training, and nutrition education programs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The stakes are high. World population is forecast to crest at 9 billion by the year 2050, which will require 50-100% more food than we produce now. The Global Harvest Initiative reports that productivity must grow by 1.75% annually for the world to double agricultural output by that date.

Driving that level of productivity increase has become much more complex in the new century. More variable weather has brought new challenges to our farmers. Access to new, arable land is limited. Availability of and competition for water is increasingly an issue. The environmental implications of farming practices are being questioned. Some consumers have demonstrated much deeper interest in how and where food is produced, and societal acceptance of new technology cannot be taken for granted.

At the same time, the next century will not be ours alone. Other nations are investing heavily in public agricultural research and U.S. agricultural competitiveness is under stress. As of 2011, for every dollar the United States invested in public agricultural R&D, China, Brazil, and India (combined) invested $2.15.
First established by Congress more than 150 years ago, our public agricultural research infrastructure – human and built – is one of the nation’s most vital assets for addressing these challenges. A second critical asset is Cooperative Extension, a robust national system of experts that disseminates new research knowledge and technology directly to the farmers, industry, and consumers throughout the U.S. and the world. As U.S. agriculture has evolved, so has Cooperative Extension – traditional county-based experts are now complemented by direct access to campus-based Extension Specialists as well as a variety of e-learning tools.

Competitiveness is built on human talent and our colleges of agriculture are focused on preparing the talent needed for the next century with more than 175,000 students enrolled (BS, MS, Ph.D.). 4-H, a youth development program of Cooperative Extension, is a talent pipeline and reaches nearly 6 million youth annually. New Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) programming is taking the proven volunteer-led, research-based 4-H youth development model into exciting new areas.

While we are ready and willing to meet any challenge, our agricultural research and extension system is in critical need of new investments in both capacity and competitive programs. Federal capacity funds – including the Hatch, Smith-Lever 3(b)-(c), and the 1890 and 1994 institutions programs – equip land-grant universities with experts to address local research and extension needs, and respond quickly to emergencies such as a disease or pest outbreak. These investments also support our capacity to excel in competitive research programs, which helps keep U.S. agriculture on the cutting edge. Both require additional support to address current and future needs.

Finally, a significant challenge faced by our land-grant and public colleges of agriculture is the state of our physical research and education infrastructure. In 2015, a BAA study estimated that the land-grant system faces a deferred maintenance backlog of $8.4 billion. Failure to address this issue will undermine our ability to conduct the research and education we need to support a globally competitive U.S. agriculture.

We are aware of a recent letter initiated by SoAR and signed by many of the stakeholder groups with whom we work. We support the general message in the letter: i.e., the current level of public support for agricultural research, Extension, and infrastructure investment is not adequate to address the food, nutrition, renewable energy, and health issues faced by our country. We appreciate the advocacy of SoAR and our many partners for increased levels of investment in research, Extension, and infrastructure at our colleges of agriculture and look forward to working constructively with them to address the issues before us.

We appreciate the challenging federal budget environment in which the next Farm Bill will be developed. We urge that priority be given to research, extension, and infrastructure investments
in U.S. colleges of agriculture, which supply the innovative solutions and human talent needed to ensure that U.S. agriculture is strong, competitive, and successful in helping to feed a growing world.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Jay T. Akridge
Chair
Board on Agriculture Assembly

JTA/eg
cc: House Committee on Agriculture
    House Committee on Appropriations