August 17, 2018

The Honorable Sonny Perdue  
Secretary  
U. S. Department of Agriculture  
200A Jamie L. Whitten Building  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC  20250

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On behalf of the 76 land-grant colleges and universities comprising the Board on Agriculture Assembly of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), we write to express deep concern with the U. S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) exploration of new headquarters locations for the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and the Economic Research Service (ERS).

We sincerely appreciate your ongoing efforts to streamline USDA and improve customer service. However, the proposed move of NIFA, as the premier agricultural science entity in the world and the linchpin of the 156-year agricultural research, education, and extension partnership between the federal government and the land-grant university system, raises important questions that need to be addressed before further executive action is taken.

NIFA, unlike facilities such as individual Agricultural Research Service (ARS) stations and the new National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility, all of which have specific missions, is USDA’s premier extramural agriculture science agency. As such, NIFA collaborates with land-grant and other universities, individual researchers, ARS, the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Defense, the Office of Science, Technology and Policy, and myriad other entities. Were NIFA to be moved elsewhere in the country, the ability of the Director, senior staff and national program leaders to effectively collaborate with this broad base of stakeholders would be greatly diminished. NIFA’s stakeholders travel to DC to meet with NIFA and other government officials in various capacities, including other funding agencies, stakeholder organizations, and Members of Congress and their staff, all in a single trip. Requiring these agency partners to travel to another location to meet with just one agency adds additional costs and potentially diminishes interest in NIFA’s programs.
Additional questions include but are not limited to:

- What is the funding impact of a move outside of the National Capital Region, to include employee buyouts and relocation costs?
- How will a move impact NIFA’s ability to recruit, hire, and retain qualified staff?
- Can NIFA be considered to stand on equal footing with its science agency peers if located outside of Washington, DC?

Again, we applaud and share your goal of making USDA the government-wide standard for customer service and responsiveness, and we believe that NIFA is a key player in achieving that goal. In fact, when Congress created NIFA in the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, they were explicit in their expectations of NIFA:

“The Managers are concerned about the visibility of competitive research grants, the increasing demands placed on the land-grant system, and the weakening financial support of both competitive grants and formula funds. By restructuring CSREES, the Managers intend for NIFA to raise the profile of agricultural research, extension, and education. The Managers believe that NIFA will be commensurate in stature with other grant-making agencies across the Federal Government, such as the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation. The Managers intend for NIFA to be an independent, scientific, policy-setting agency for the food and agricultural sciences, which will reinvigorate our nation’s investment in agricultural research, extension, and education.”

Given Congress’ explicit expectations when it created NIFA, we remain hopeful that NIFA’s new location will allow it, and the stakeholders it serves, to be held in the same high regard that its sister science agencies are.

Sincerely,

Orlando F. McMeans
Chair
Board on Agriculture Assembly

OFM/eg

cc: The Honorable Mike Conaway, Chairman, Committee on Agriculture, U. S. House of Representatives
    The Honorable Pat Roberts, Chairman, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, United States Senate
    The Honorable Collin C. Peterson, Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture, U. S. House of Representatives
    The Honorable Debbie Stabenow, Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture Nutrition, and Forestry, United States Senate
The Honorable Rodney Frelinghuysen, Chairman, Committee on Appropriations, U. S. House of Representatives
The Honorable Richard C. Shelby, Chairman, Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate
The Honorable Nita M. Lowey, Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations, U. S. House of Representatives
The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy, Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate