



August 31, 2025

The Honorable Brooke Rollins
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Dear Secretary Rollins,

On behalf of agInnovation Northeast, the coalition of fourteen state agricultural experiment stations (SAES), primarily located on the campuses of the region's thirteen Land-grant Universities, we extend our gratitude for the opportunity to provide input on the USDA's reorganization plan.

To place our comments in context, we share this thumbnail description of the Northeast region and of the region's contribution to America's agricultural enterprise. According to the 2020 Census, more than 67 million people live in the Northeast. This represents approximately 20% of the total U.S. population, living on 6% of its total land area, while producing 24% of the nation's GDP.

The Northeast region is home to approximately 25 million acres of agricultural land, constituting 167,000 farms which generate more than \$19 billion to the U.S. agricultural economy, about 2.5 times as much income per acre as farms elsewhere in America. Clearly, Northeast farmers use their resources efficiently! While dairy continues to lead Northeast agriculture, the region has a rich diversity of crops and a significant economic impact, encompassing agritourism, nursery and horticulture, specialty crops, forestry, and, of course, maple syrup. While challenges to farming in the Northeast include a limited amount (and high cost) of farmland and a high population density, opportunities exist for innovators in food systems given the proximity to the populations of our large cities.

Our regional Land-grant universities drive innovation through research supported by capacity grants and competitive grants. All northeast agricultural experiment stations contribute to a research system dedicated to meeting the regional, national, and global challenges associated with agriculture, food systems, natural resources, and human nutrition by offering the best available science. These science-driven impacts are made possible by sustained public investment. Federal support for agricultural research yields an extraordinary 20:1 return on every taxpayer dollar and is amplified by state and private contributions and partnerships.

It's through this regional lens that we share the following comments and recommendations.

We commend the Administration's commitment to improving effectiveness, accountability, enhanced services, reduced bureaucracy, and cost savings for all Americans. These priorities align with our shared mission: to equip farmers and ranchers with science and innovation,

strengthen biosecurity, steward lands and forests, and ensure a safe, abundant, affordable, and nutritious food supply.

Ensuring Continued USDA Presence and Impact in the Northeast

Our directors noted that the five hub locations, two core administrative locations, and agency service centers will all be located outside of the Northeast region. While the plan aims to retain some employees in the NCR, we strongly recommend that a portion of these staff be directly engaged with Northeastern farmers, ranchers, foresters, supporting industries, and Land-grant universities. Their role should be to bring this regional knowledge back to the USDA, ensuring it informs national research priorities, programs, and the roles USDA staff will carry out across the other five hub locations. This will ensure that the USDA maintains a robust research program to support farmers, ranchers, and foresters in the Northeast.

Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC):

The BARC has been a critical research facility in the region and a collaborator with many of our institutional scientists. As BARC undergoes its transition over the next several years, we recommend prioritizing deployment of BARC scientists to Northeast ARS centers or Land-grant universities in an effort to continue delivering impactful, regionally relevant, nationally significant science.

National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA):

We are thrilled with the Administration's historic \$1.125 billion investment in Land-grant university research facilities through the President's Big Beautiful Bill (BBB). This represents a generational opportunity to accelerate innovation and secure American competitiveness for decades to come. NIFA's leadership in implementing the BBB research facilities program is essential to its success. Current staffing levels are sufficient to launch and manage this program effectively. To maximize continuity and preserve institutional knowledge, we recommend retaining the current workforce whenever possible. If relocation proceeds, the transition should occur in phases. Employees who cannot relocate should be retained temporarily to serve as mentors for new hires until staffing goals in Kansas City are met. This approach safeguards program momentum, minimizes disruptions, and builds a strong, experienced workforce for the future.

Agricultural Research Service (ARS):

ARS Area Office staff are critical to managing cooperative agreements and MOUs with Land-grant universities, functions not readily assumed by the Office of National Programs. If Area Offices are consolidated, we recommend that Area Office staff remain geographically close to the research programs they oversee, even if they report to a central office. ARS scientists and administrators are indispensable partners in addressing the nation's most pressing food, agriculture, health, and natural resource challenges. Leveraging our shared expertise and resources enhances both the effectiveness and efficiency of America's agricultural research enterprise.

Biotechnology Regulatory Services (BRS):

The work of BRS within USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is vital to Land-grant researchers developing agricultural innovations. For this strategically important office, we recommend that BRS staff remain in the NCR to minimize attrition and maintain seamless stakeholder and interagency coordination. Maintaining BRS staff in the National

Capital Region (NCR) ensures continuity with their regulatory counterparts at the FDA and EPA, essential partners in the Coordinated Framework for the Regulation of Biotechnology.

Broader Recommendations to USDA Agencies:

- **Safeguard and Leverage USDA Expertise:** Retain the critical scientific and programmatic expertise of USDA staff, vital to Land-grant university partnerships across NIFA, ARS, FS, NRCS, AMS, and other agencies, by providing flexible options for employees to continue contributing from their current locations. Preserving this expertise positions USDA to accelerate innovation and deliver greater value to American agriculture.
- **Sustain and Strengthen Program Capacity:** Ensure program continuity and long-term strength by adopting a phased transition with structured mentorship. This approach not only maintains capacity during reorganization but also fosters a new generation of USDA staff guided by experienced mentors, thereby securing institutional knowledge for the future.
- **Enhance Research Partnerships through Facilities Support:** Support Land-grant universities in accommodating both current and relocated USDA ARS and other federal scientists. This creates stronger hubs of collaboration, maximizes the impact of federal-university partnerships, and accelerates the research advances needed to keep American farmers and ranchers globally competitive, American people healthy, and rural communities thriving.

In conclusion, we strongly support the Administration's vision for a modern, effective, and accountable USDA. Our recommendations are intended to enhance the Department's ability to fulfill its mission while safeguarding the capacity of its staff, partnerships, and programs to serve farmers, ranchers, and all Americans.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important process. We stand ready to work with you to ensure that USDA's reorganization strengthens our partnership and enhances our shared ability to deliver unmatched value to U.S. agriculture and the American people.

Respectfully,



Dr. Richard C. Rhodes III
Executive Director, agInnovation Northeast