Questionable moves at USDA

When the House and Senate farm-bill conference committee meets Wednesday, there are some things they should discuss but probably won’t: the Trump administration’s decisions to place the Agriculture Department’s economic research functions directly under the secretary and to move most of the employees of the Economic Research Service and the National Institute for Food and Agriculture out of Washington.

Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue announced last month that he has placed the Office of the Chief Economist directly under him, and that he plans to “align” the Economic Research Service with the chief economist and to relocate most of the 600-plus employees of ERS and NIFA, which provides money to land-grant universities and other institutions for a wide range of agricultural research. He has already invited communities to tell the USDA by Sept. 14 why they should be the new home for the two divisions that have always been located in Washington.

Perdue’s argument is that he plans to move the agencies so that the researchers will be closer to the farmers who benefit from their work. He also said it has become harder to recruit employees from the land-grant universities that graduate most agricultural specialists, because the cost of living in the Washington area is so high.

National organizations and leaders who have a stake in the USDA’s leadership have denounced the plans.

The first and most outspoken opponent is Sonny Ramaswamy, who was director of NIFA for six years until May when his term was up. On his Facebook page, Ramaswamy wrote, “Is this dumb and shortsighted or what? The National Institute of Food and Agriculture, which supports the most successful and envi...