



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 envied research and extension enterprise in the world, is being proposed to be basically broken up."

In an interview, Ramaswamy said, "I believe the justification to move NIFA fails on all three reasons cited: staff recruitment and retention; bringing NIFA closer to stakeholders; and cost savings."

Margaret Zeigler, executive director of the Global Harvest Initiative, a coalition of some of the biggest agribusiness companies, said the administration should keep ERS and NIFA in the Washington area because researchers are attracted to "considerable data resources and a range of related government institutions such as the National Science Foundation, the USDA Agricultural Research Service, the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, and other branch-

es of USDA," which will remain in Washington. Keeping ERS and NIFA in the Washington area "can harness the research synergies of all these institutions, reducing overlap and eliminating gaps in the important sector of food and agriculture research," Zeigler said.

If NIFA is located in a city where there is a "spectacular" land-grant university and NIFA makes grants to that university, then the other institutions are going to say, "What am I? Chopped liver?" Ramaswamy said.

University officials already come to Washington to visit various federal agencies, and requiring them to go to another city would add to their costs, he said.

Susan Offutt, a former ERS administrator, wrote in *The*

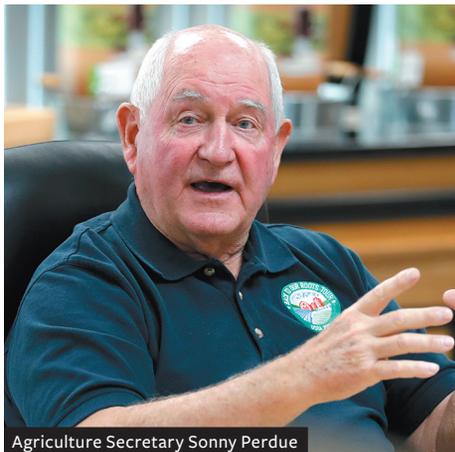
Hill that placing ERS under a chief economist working for the secretary "jeopardizes the independence, credibility, and objectivity" of the agency. Moving it makes no sense, she added, "because ERS "is not a 'farmer-facing' agency, but rather supports congressional and administration policy officials as well as the program agencies of USDA that deliver key farm, environmental, and food services."

The plan has led to wild speculation about the Trump administration's real motives. One is that it would benefit a member of Congress. North Dakota Republican

Rep. Kevin Cramer, who is trying to unseat Sen. Heidi Heitkamp, a Democrat, has already proposed that Fargo, home of North Dakota State University, would be a fine home for ERS and NIFA.

But the plan could also be more insidious. Perdue has said that the USDA will pay relocation costs for employees, but so many won't want to make the move that it looks like a purge of progressive researchers. Perdue already demoted Mary Bohman, the ERS administrator, to associate administrator of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and appointed a man as acting ERS administrator. Could it be that the Trump administration wants to hire a new generation of white, male, heterosexual land-grant university graduates who are more likely to be interested in genetic modification, for example, than in climate change, obesity, or other topics of emerging interest?

Farm-bill conferees could use the conference report to forbid politicizing the economics function at the USDA and moving its research functions. They should consider it. □



Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue

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