



American Economic Association

Office of the Secretary-Treasurer, 2014 Broadway, Suite 305, Nashville, TN 37203, Phone 615-322-2595, Fax 615-343-7590

Committee on Economic Statistics www.aeaweb.org/about-aea/committees/economic-statistics

Committee on Government Relations www.aeaweb.org/about-aea/committees/government-relations

March 1, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Hearty congratulations on your appointment as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. We Chairs and members of the American Economic Association's (AEA) Committee on Economic Statistics (AEASat) and Committee on Government Relations (AEACGR) are pleased to send you our report, *Necessary Improvement in the U.S. Statistical Infrastructure: A Report to the Biden/Harris Administration* (attached, and available online at: <https://www.aeaweb.org/content/file?id=13507>).

Established in 1885, the AEA is a non-profit, non-partisan, scholarly association dedicated to the discussion and publication of economics research and comprised of over 20,000 economists from academia, business, and government. The AEASat promotes AEA member access to current, detailed, useful economic statistics provided by the Federal government and other sources. The AEACGR is charged with representing the interests of the economics profession in Washington DC and other locations around the country without taking a position on questions of economic policy or on any partisan matter.

As you know, USDA is home to 2 of the 13 agencies officially designated as U.S. Federal Statistical Agencies (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/information-and-regulatory-affairs/statistical-programs-standards/>) – the Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). USDA also has influence upon several economic processes and trends that collectively define the state of the U.S. economy. With that in mind, we note the following recommendations from our report that are among those with direct relevance to the Department of Agriculture:

- “The Executive Branch, with legislative support from Congress, must act to prevent politicization of federal statistics.” This recommendation is fully supportive of President Biden’s January 27, 2021 Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government Through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking
- “The Executive Branch should support the recommendations of the U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking to help assure the widest possible access to federal statistics and administrative data under high standards of privacy and confidentiality.”



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- “The Executive Branch and the Congress need to work together to develop fundamental processes and incentives that assure that federal statistical agencies, under sufficient privacy and confidentiality provisions, can access State administrative data for improved State and Federal decision making. USDA program agencies manage, with States, administrative data of great value to economic research on nutrition assistance, household well-being, and poverty.”
- “The federal government should actively facilitate the involvement of the private sector in federal statistics, for the benefit of both public and private sectors,” and
- “The Department of Agriculture must restore the viability of the Economic Research Service (ERS)”

As the report points out, a majority of ERS positions were relocated to Kansas City in 2018. Following the relocation, roughly 75-percent of the professional staff resigned or retired. More than two years after the relocation was announced, ERS has severe staff shortages, particularly in its ranks of senior analysts and management, and is facing substantial staff recruitment challenges. As a consequence, the agency’s statistical programs have been abridged and federal and state governments are suffering from inadequate agricultural statistics generally, but especially statistics to inform rural development, food assistance and security, and agriculturally related natural resource conservation policies.

The AEA does not presume a prescription for the rehabilitation of ERS. We do, however, urge wisdom and widespread participation by ERS stakeholders in deciding where, how, and under what circumstances the agency is changed in the process.

We would greatly appreciate the opportunity to discuss these and related recommendations with you and appropriate USDA appointees and/or career staff. Who can we contact to make arrangements for a meeting?

Many thanks, and congratulations, again.

John Haltiwanger

Professor of Economics, University of Maryland, and
Chair, AEA Committee on Economic Statistics

Kenneth Troske

Professor of Economics, University of Kentucky, and
Chair, AEA Committee on Government Relations

cc: Hubert Hamer, Administrator, National Agricultural Statistics Service
Spiro Stefanou, Administrator, Economic Research Service

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