

September 26, 2025

The Honorable Brooke Rollins
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Stephen Vaden
Deputy Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Re: U.S. Department of Agriculture Reorganization Plan (SM 1078-015)

Dear Secretary Rollins and Deputy Secretary Vaden,

On behalf of the Breakthrough Institute, an independent 501(c)(3) global research center that identifies and promotes technological solutions to environmental and human development challenges, we write to share our concerns regarding the July 24th memorandum detailing plans for the “consolidation, unification, and optimization of functions” within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Breakthrough’s Food and Agriculture program advocates for strategies to improve productivity growth in U.S. agriculture. Bolstering U.S. food and agricultural research (R&D) capacity has historically been a key driver to reduce food prices, enhance food security, and enable farmers to produce more with less land and other inputs. And yet, public investment in U.S. agricultural R&D declined significantly from \$7.64 billion in 2002 to \$5.16 billion in 2019—a nearly 30% reduction, adjusting for inflation. This decline is the leading contributor to a slowdown in agricultural productivity growth. The 2024 Global Agricultural Productivity Report found that U.S. agriculture has not been growing more productive, while India, for example, has a strong annual productivity growth rate of 1.7 percent.

Today, with farmers facing high input costs, growing pest and disease pressures, and a rapidly shifting trade landscape, new innovations are needed and a strong federal research enterprise remains essential. We commend your commitment to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of USDA. However, we are concerned the proposed reorganization plan risks eroding research capacity, diminishing workforce expertise, and disrupting vital services for farmers and rural communities.

The proposed reorganization, including the closure of the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center, risks exacerbating an **erosion of research capacity** in the U.S. Sweeping freezes and cancellations of USDA competitive research grants are already disrupting agricultural R&D, including at our nation’s land grant universities. These disruptions are compounded by an exodus of USDA’s most experienced in-house research staff via two iterations of a deferred resignation program. China already invests more heavily in agricultural R&D than the U.S. Any reduction in research staff or grant-making capacity threatens to further set back U.S. agricultural science, eroding America’s ability to compete in global markets. Agricultural research can have long lag times, making it even more dangerous to abandon investments in agricultural innovation today that will leave U.S. producers empty handed and less competitive in the years ahead.

Reducing staff capacity risks **diminishing workforce expertise** and will jeopardize the agency's ability to administer its slate of competitive grant programs that fund critical research. Absent details from USDA regarding the agency's plans to retain staff expertise and capacity, we are concerned the reorganization will lead to a similar loss of personnel as seen when USDA relocated key agency functions to Kansas City in 2019. Research funding will backslide if USDA lacks adequate staff to review applications and get funding out the door each year, despite existing NIFA programs being regularly oversubscribed with applications from scientists at land-grant universities and other research institutions. The loss of experienced staff not only jeopardizes the continuity of ongoing agricultural R&D, but also hobbles USDA's capacity to pivot swiftly in crises like disease outbreaks or market shocks. Replacing this intellectual capital will be difficult, costly, and time-consuming, with long-lasting ramifications for program effectiveness, policy depth, and trust in USDA's scientific and operational integrity.

Beyond the immediate impacts on research institutions, the sudden freezing and cancellation of USDA programs are **economically destabilizing for farmers and rural communities**. USDA's customers build their planting, labor, and investment decisions around multi-year USDA commitments. When those commitments are abruptly halted, producers face stranded costs, disrupted harvest cycles, and foregone markets. Community-based organizations and local governments lose confidence in USDA as a reliable partner. This breakdown in trust will make it harder to recruit farmers into new R&D pilots in the future. The long-term result is a weakened feedback loop between federally funded science and its most critical end-users. This could lower the utility and on-farm adoption of tools, technologies and practices informed by future research, which in turn weakens the economic return on taxpayer dollars dedicated to research projects.

With these concerns in mind, we respectfully urge USDA to:

- Conduct an economic and workforce impact analysis with direct engagement of USDA staff to measure how reorganization affects agricultural research, rural economies, and service delivery.
- Provide transparent justification for USDA's decision to consolidate into five hubs, including criteria, alternatives considered, and implications for farmer access to research, extension services, and technical assistance.
- Make available details on how USDA plans to retain staff expertise and capacity to operate existing grant programs at their current size, in accordance with funding appropriated by Congress, ensuring the continuity of vital agricultural research and services.
- Allow for public comment on plans to close or consolidate research functions at research centers, in addition to the closure of the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center.

We urge you to ensure transparency and accountability in reorganization efforts and protect the U.S. agricultural R&D infrastructure and workforce that delivers lasting benefits for all.

Sincerely,

Emily Bass, Director of Federal Policy, Food & Agriculture
The Breakthrough Institute