

Funding for federal agricultural research facilities falls far short of needs

In discussing the agricultural budget, it is easy to focus in on commodity support, nutrition, and environmental programs and ignore the cost of maintaining the agricultural research facilities that are at the heart of the work of the USDA. When farmers go to their local extension agent with a problem, the agent's answer is probably dependent on work that has been conducted with money and in facilities supported by the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and Land Grant Universities, which receive a portion of their funding from the Federal Government.

Currently, the ARS owns and operates facilities that are valued at nearly \$3.7 billion and carries out research on everything from citrus greening disease (a problem for Florida citrus growers) to highly pathogenic avian influenza (a disease that resulted in the destruction of over 50 million birds in 211 commercial and 21 backyard flocks from the fall of 2014 through mid-June 2015).

From field to table, ARS scientists find solutions to technical problems that affect agricultural producers and American consumers every day. In conjunction with the Land Grant System, the ARS conducts research that benefits the public. Much of this research does not have the profit potential that would attract investment by commercial firms. They need a payback period that is much shorter than the type of basic research conducted by ARS provides.

The ARS focuses on areas of research most crucial to US agriculture where federal research is inherently suited to make innovative contributions.

With periodic upgrades, the facilities used by ARS scientists typically have a functional lifespan of 35-40 years before they "require major renovation/modernization or replacement." These repairs and upgrades require a about \$150 million a year. The repair and maintenance budget has been flat at \$18 million for about 16 years and has not kept pace with inflation.

But like with many of us, when money is tight, the ag budget is balanced by deferring maintenance and the result is the slow deterioration of ARS facilities. In an April 2012 report, "The USDA Agricultural Research Service Capital Investment Strategy (<http://tinyurl.com/y7sqmvxd>), the USDA estimated that in addition to recurring capital investment, repair and maintenance costs, the agency is dealing with \$1 billion in deferred maintenance in ARS laboratory facilities.

In the midst of farm bill battles over the allocation of scarce funds, commodity programs have advocates as do nutrition and environmental programs. If we, as a nation, are to continue to have state-of-the-art agricultural, environmental, and nutrition research, we need to also advocate for an adequate facilities budget for ARS. Without adequate funding, scientists have to spend time developing work-arounds to compensate for deteriorating facilities.

On a more personal note, we missed writing this column for three weeks because Harwood was hospitalized with an unidentified, but potentially fatal, illness. We thank our readers and friends for their cards, flowers, and other means of support during this trying period.

For Harwood, it is great to be out of a hospital bed and back behind the computer, keeping track of agricultural policy issues and writing this column. Daryll is very happy that his colleague and best friend is on the mend.

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Dr. Harwood D. Schaffer: Adjunct Research Assistant Professor, Sociology Department, University of Tennessee and Director, Agricultural Policy Analysis Center. Dr. Daryll E. Ray: Emeritus Professor, Institute of Agriculture, University of Tennessee and Retired Director, Agricultural Policy Analysis Center.

Email: hdschaffer@utk.edu and dray@utk.edu; <http://www.agpolicy.org>.

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