

Legislation could block relocation of USDA offices

February 14, 2019

On February 14, Representative Chellie Pingree (D-ME-1) introduced H.R. 1221, the Agriculture Research Integrity Act of 2019, which seeks to block the relocation of two U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) offices out of Washington D.C.

H.R. 1221 would amend the Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994 to reaffirm the authority of the undersecretary of agriculture for research, education, and economics, thus preventing USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue from relocating the main offices of the Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA).

Secretary Perdue announced his intent to move the two offices in August 2018, but has been unable to move forward with those plans due to the partial government shutdown affecting USDA, among other federal agencies, for most of January 2019. USDA has received bids from various parties interested in hosting one or both offices, including states, private organizations, and educational establishments. It has thus far received interest from 136 communities in 35 states.

According to the agency, part of the rationale behind relocating ERS and NIFA would be to place USDA resources closer to many stakeholders who live outside of the National Capital Region, and to attract highly-qualified staff with training and interests in agriculture who would be otherwise disincentivized by Washington D.C.'s high cost of living.

The relocation would affect approximately 700 employees at the USDA offices, some of whom may choose to find new jobs rather than move to a different city. Joseph Glauber, former chief economist at USDA, said "the most likely result is that you'll lose a lot of good people," noting that he has "already been asked to write several letters of recommendation for ERS people [applying for another job]." John E. Lee, Jr., former administrator of ERS, echoed this sentiment in an opinion article that was published in the Hill, stating that "a major physical move that causes the loss of many experienced staff would cripple the agency and mean years of rebuilding and training to regain its present eminence."

Other organizations that have opposed the plan include the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC), an alliance of stakeholder groups that seek to promote and enhance sustainable food and farm policy at the federal level. NSAC has requested a cost estimate analysis of the USDA office relocations and recommends that the agency indefinitely suspends its relocation plans.

Sources: American Association for the Advancement of Science; E&E News; The Hill; Library of Congress; National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition; U.S. Department of Agriculture; U.S House of Representatives.
