

Relocation of USDA agencies sparks criticism

Former ERS administrator wants 'why' behind move

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Former USDA officials and farm groups are sounding the alarm over the USDA's plans to move the Economic Research Service and National Institute of Food and Agriculture out of Washington, D.C.

The new locations have not yet been chosen. The move is slated to be complete by the end of 2019.

The American Statistical Association has sent a letter to Congress, signed by 56 former USDA and federal statistical agency officials to warn of damage the move would cause, including:

- The loss of staff expertise due to employees not willing to move.
- Moving the ERS far from its clientele and collaborators who either are located in or visit Washington, D.C.
- Loss of visibility with policy makers.
- Puts ERS independence



Susan Offutt

and credibility at risk. "What we have from the USDA is essentially a one-page memo that doesn't tell us much about the why," Susan Offutt, ERS administrator from 1996 to 2006 under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, told the Capital Press. "They say, 'Oh, we're going to save money.' How much? Don't know. 'We're going to serve customers better.' Who are the customers? They say they're farmers, but that's not really the correct representation. ...

"The department gives us nothing to go on," she said. "If you make a criticism, they say, 'Oh, don't worry about that.' We don't know what to worry about and what not to be concerned about."

ERS provides USDA with objective, reliable, trusted data, said Steve Pierson, director of science policy for the statistical association.

The association asked Congress to tell USDA to make no further decisions on the relocation until more information is known. The letter was also signed by 45



Steve Pierson

organizations, including the American Dairy Science Association, the American Malting Barley Association, the National Barley Improvement Committee, National Turfgrass Federation, National Young Farmers Coalition, Soil Science Society of America and WineAmerica.

Scott Heisel, vice president and technical director with the malting barley association, said his organization is concerned about the potential loss of experienced personnel and accessibility to both organizations.

"What we're hearing is they're moving out to areas where the stakeholders are, but from our experience, most of the stakeholders end up in Washington at some point during the year," Heisel said. "You can't move it to where all the stakeholders are."

Offutt and Pierson cite concerns over the 2019 presidential budget, which proposes reducing the ERS budget from \$86.2 million to \$45 million, a 48 percent cut. It appears the agency will

focus more on commodity markets and less on other topics, such as natural resources, rural development or food and consumer issues, Offutt said.

Offutt and Pierson speculate the timing of the move announcement has to do with lawmakers' emphasis on the Farm Bill and the budget.

Because of that, other farm organization representatives are possibly reluctant to oppose the USDA, Offutt said.

"This is a delicate time in terms of the relationship of the department to commodity growers and what steps would be taken to assist with adjustment to new trade policies and tariffs," she said. "Dangling a federal goody out in front of states in an election year means you probably don't hear from a lot of people that you might in a different context."

Proposed expressions of interest to house the agencies were due Oct. 15, Offutt and Pierson say. USDA has told Congress the final decision will be made in January.

"What happens between Oct. 15 and January is not so clear," she said.

She said the goal of the letters is to "stop the plan in its tracks — don't realign, don't move."



Don Jenkins/Capital Press File

A worker picks cucumbers in Washington. The state Employment Security Department sent wage surveys to 2,130 employers starting Oct. 15. The results have been contentious in the past.

As dispute lingers, Washington to again survey farm pay

Last year had low response rate

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

The Washington Employment Security Department started asking farmers Monday how much they paid workers this year, an annual survey meant to standardize piece-rate pay for foreign seasonal workers, but which got little participation last year.

The voluntary survey's low response rate shouldn't be surprising, said Dan Fazio, executive director of WAFLA, the state's largest supplier of foreign farmworkers. The survey fails to capture the nuances of farm work and inflates piece-rates for tasks such as picking apples, he said.

"We can't abide by a survey that will not produce accurate results," Fazio said.

The employment department planned to start surveying 2,130 employers beginning Monday. A survey of workers began Oct. 1. The wage survey has been a point of contention between the employment department and some farm groups, including WAFLA, formerly known as the Washington Farm Labor Association.

The participation in last year's survey fell short of meeting the threshold set by the U.S. Department of Labor. The state employment department defended the results as statistically sound and has tried to get the federal agency to accept them. The department is continuing to talk with the Labor Department, the state's director of employment policy, Daniel Zeitlin, said Oct. 12 in an email.

WAFLA celebrated the lack of results, saying growers could pay free-market rates for labor, rather than government-mandated piece-

rates. Organizations such as Columbia Legal Services and the Washington State Labor Council complained that without mandated piece rates, foreign workers could be forced to accept the lower-paying \$14.12 an hour guaranteed H-2A workers.

Columbia Legal attorney Joe Morrison said Friday that based on a few talks with H-2A workers, he has not heard evidence that the dispute over the wage survey has so far affected workers. "What I've heard is that people are paying piece rates," he said. "My hope is that this was a lot of nothing, and that for the workers, the harvest went fine."

Still, the concern remains that continually discarding the wage survey eventually will suppress worker pay, he said.

Fazio, who drew official ire for advising growers on how to fill out the survey in 2015, said two results from the 2017 survey jumped out.

The average wage for picking Red Delicious apples jumped to \$25 from \$20 a bin and for picking gala apples to \$25 from \$20 a bin. Fazio said that piece-rates might reach or exceed that at some point in the season, but "we just can't live with that as a starting wage."

The Washington State Tree Fruit Association also has had concerns about the accuracy of the survey, the group's president, Jon DeVaney, said in an email.

He said the employment department has agreed to clarify on this year's survey the fact that piece-rates can vary among apple varieties depending on whether workers are clipping stems, or selectively picking based on color and ripeness rather than all the fruit, he said.

Improving how guest-worker wages are set would have to be done at the federal level, DeVaney said.

Idaho's wheat crop sets record for yield

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Exceptional spring wheat yields in Idaho pushed this year's wheat crop to a record overall yield.

Growers averaged 91.9 bushels per acre, edging past the old record, 91.4 bushels per acre, set in 2016, said Chris Mertz, regional director of the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Records date back to 1879, Mertz said.

"(For) two years in our database, it has averaged higher than 90," he said of the overall wheat yield.

Spring wheat averaged a yield of 95 bushels per acre, up from 85 bushels last year, while winter wheat averaged 90 bushels per acre, up from 80 bushels per acre last year. It's the first time spring wheat yields in the state averaged more than 90 bushels, Mertz said.

"I think that's pretty impressive, it shows conditions went well and farmers are using all the tools appropriate to get an excellent return," Mertz said. "Both of them are nice, but spring wheat had a nice jump this year."

"The yields were boosted by good moisture through the year and by moderate temperatures," Blaine Jacobson, executive di-



EO Media Group File

Pacific Northwest wheat farmers generally reported above-average yields in this year's crop.

rector of the Idaho Wheat Commission, told the Capital Press. "We started the planting year with good moisture and continued to receive timely rains."

Some years, triple-digit temperatures in early summer can curb yields, but temperatures were favorable this year, Jacobson said. Some parts did hit those temperatures, but it was more scattered than usual and after wheat had headed out.

Idaho produced 104 million bushels, according to the USDA.

"It is nice to see our overall production above 100 million bushels," Jacobson said, adding that overall growing conditions were "superb."

At a recent Washington

Grain Commission meeting in Spokane, several board members reported yields 50 percent higher than usual in their districts.

Glen Squires, CEO of Washington Grain Commission, attributes that to "excellent" moisture conditions. Drier areas where yields are typically 35 to 45 bushels per acre reached 55 to 80 bushels per acre.

"A lot of it just was perfect moisture conditions — good soil moisture, timely rains, good rains, not a lot of heat stress," Squires said. "It was just a great production crop year."

Washington's state average yield for winter and spring

production, 70.8 bushels per acre, was the third-highest on record, Squires said. In 2016, the average was 71.5 bushels per acre. In 2011, the average was 71.3 bushels per acre.

Average yield in Oregon was 67 bushels per acre.

"Our growers reported average to above-average yields, with some reporting record or near-record harvest," said Blake Rowe, Oregon Wheat CEO. "Moisture was low and quality good. Protein was lower than the last couple of years, but there should still be enough at the higher protein levels to meet the specs of customers who prefer higher protein soft white."

Judge approves auction of Oregon beef packer assets

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

A state judge has authorized a defunct Oregon beef packer to auction its assets since no buyer has committed to purchase the facility as a package.

On Oct. 15, Lane County Circuit Judge Charles Carlson agreed to a request by Richard Hooper, a court-appointed receiver, to hold an auction for the equipment owned by Bartels Packing of Eugene, Ore.

Earlier this summer, Hooper had notified the court that a "letter of intent" had been submitted by a buyer who planned to keep the slaughterhouse and processing facilities operational.

At this point, however, the prospect of a buyer re-opening Bartels as a "going concern" wasn't appear viable so

the company would prefer to offer its assets for auction as a lot rather than allowing bidders to "cherry pick" items, an attorney for Hooper said at the hearing.

Some of the equipment is computerized and only a few years old, so the auctioneer plans to avoid starting with low minimum bids to achieve the best prices, Hooper said.

An attorney for Chris Bartels, the company's owner, raised the possibility of certain items fetching the best value if sold separately apart from the auction.

However, the judge said there was "no question" an open auction would be the most effective venue and approved the event, with the provision that it can be called off if a buyer is found for the entire company.

Bartels Packing shut down operations in March and laid off more than 140 employees, citing the loss of a major customer and continuing sales declines.

At the time of its closure, the company had a total debt of \$8.3 million — including \$4.6 million owed to cattle suppliers and feedlots — with assets worth roughly \$14 million.

Apart from owing money to livestock producers, Bartels stopped participating in cattle auctions, where the company was considered an important buyer of local and grassfed cows. According to court documents, a property lease for the Bartels facilities is expiring early next year, so the auction would most likely take place by mid-December.

Weekly Fieldwork Report



Item/description (Source: USDA, NASS; NOAA)	Ore.	Wash.	Idaho	Calif.
• Days suitable for fieldwork (As of Oct. 16)	5.7	6.3	4.8	7
• Topsoil moisture, surplus	0	0	2%	0
• Topsoil moisture, percent short	66%	57%	43%	75%
• Subsoil moisture, surplus	0	0	0	0
• Subsoil moisture, percent short	78%	58%	56%	75%
• Precipitation probability (6-10 day outlook as of Oct. 16)	40-50% Above	40-50% Above	33-40% Above	33-40% Above/ Normal

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