



NATIONAL COALITION FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

April 29, 2011-via E-mail karen.hunter@osec.usda.gov

RE: Comments on Draft USDA REE Action Plan

On behalf of the National Coalition for Food and Agricultural Research (National C-FAR), I am pleased to respond to the request for comments on the draft Research, Education, and Economics (REE) Mission Area Action Plan for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Research, Education, and Economics mission area.

It is our understanding that the document was drafted to lay out the mission area's highest priority goals and the actions necessary to undertake for achievement of those goals, and that it is reflective of feedback expressed by National C-FAR and other stakeholders since the public sharing of the Farm Bill-mandated REE Roadmap for USDA Science.

National C-FAR is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, consensus-based and *customer-led* coalition that brings food, agriculture, nutrition, conservation and natural resource stakeholders together with the food and agriculture research and extension community, serving as a forum and a unified voice in support of sustaining and increasing public investment at the national level in food and agricultural research, extension and education.

National C-FAR believes the nation has a serious food and agricultural science deficit, just as the nation has a budget deficit. This food and agricultural science funding deficit is serious, long running and unsustainable. Failure to address this research deficit will have real negative consequences, not just to the agriculture and food system but to the entire nation and U.S. economy.

At the risk of oversimplification, funding is the fuel that will fuel the REE engine and determine how effectively the action plan will be implemented. If USDA's REE mission continues to be starved for funds, any action plan is destined to fall short of not only its potential but of leading to the outcomes this nation needs from the food and agricultural system.

By any measure, federal funding for food and agricultural research, extension and education has failed to keep pace with identified priority needs. Federal investment in research and development at the USDA has declined by about one-fourth since FY 2003. A continuing deficit in terms of a commitment to federal funding for agricultural research will have detrimental effects on human and animal health and the nation's economy.

Unless sufficient funding is achieved, the best concepts about how to organize and conduct research won't be able to deliver the results needed by the nation. With the nation and world seeking solutions for climate change, sustainable fuel production, ecosystem health, food security and nutrition challenges, now is the time to grow investment in our nation's agricultural research enterprise.

This quest starts with articulating a compelling case to fund unmet needs. To help prepare the best case possible for enhanced funding, National C-FAR urges USDA to make it a priority to identify current and future challenges to the food and agricultural sector and the REE needs and resource requirements to respond to those challenges in the coming years in a timely and effective manner.

USDA and the Administration should base annual budget requests for its REE mission on such a needs assessment.

Consistent with our stated mission, National C-FAR's comments are focused on how the REE Action Plan articulates the case for addressing the longstanding REE funding deficit and helps lay the groundwork for necessary increases in federal investment:

- A fundamental recommendation is that the draft REE Action Plan should include a thoughtful and credible “*Research Business Plan*,” either as part of the Action Plan, or as a necessary complement. The REE Action Plan is a hollow shell unless the resources needed to accomplish stated goals are identified and articulated, with a business/action plan to secure the necessary resources.
- Such a “Research Business Plan” needs to make the best case possible for how much funding is needed to achieve the goals and REE programs intended to meet those goals, as well as the likely consequences of not providing sufficient funding. For example—
 - What is the best estimate of funding needed to accomplish stated desired outcomes?
 - What is the appropriate food and agricultural science role of the public sector vs. the private sector? Make a clear case that publicly financed REE is a *necessary complement to private sector research*, focusing in areas where the private sector does not have an incentive to invest, when 1) the pay-off is over a long term; 2) the potential market is more speculative; 3) the effort is during the pre-technology stage; and 4) where the benefits are widely diffused.
 - How will the Action Plan (and outcomes) be impacted by different funding levels—for example, current funding, 2X funding, funding at a level identified as needed to accomplish all stated goals, 0.5X funding?
 - How will priorities change based on different funding levels? How will outcomes be affected? Will outcomes still be timely to meet identified challenges, like closing the productivity gap and feed 9 billion people?
- Those responsible for making difficult budget decisions in the Administration and the Congress arguably don't have even the basic information needed to make informed decisions about REE funding levels with the information currently available. Those who read this action plan should also come away with an appreciation of what will and won't be addressed at different resource levels.
 - While studies touting the high returns on public investment (ROI) are helpful, that doesn't appear to be compelling enough to attract additional funding, especially when the trend is to cut spending, not increase it.
 - The REE Action Plan should emphasize the current leadership's commitment to focusing resources to make a difference rather than spreading limited funds a mile wide and an inch deep.
 - The Action Plan should articulate choices on what will and will not be done [and done well] at different resource scenario levels. It should talk about focusing resources to make a difference rather than spreading funding a mile wide and an inch deep. That's important.

- This is a shared responsibility, both of USDA and of REE stakeholders—those who conduct the REE and those who need the outcomes. If the “Research Business Plan” answers aren’t available, then perhaps it is time to invest additional resources in developing defensible answers—even if just through a building block approach, improving the quality of information provided to budget decision makers a step at a time so they can better understand the rationale of budget requests and likely consequences of funding decisions.
- For example, a “productivity gap” has been identified in tracking what will be needed to produce enough food to feed 9 billion people.
 - What’s the commensurate “research gap” in developing the science and tools to close the productivity gap?
 - What are defensible estimates of how much will be needed—and when (lead times)?
 - What is the appropriate and/or necessary portion/role of public sector REE investment?
 - How much can leveraging contribute to closing the “research gap?”
 - What are the consequences of not committing to adequate public investment?

Other Comments:

- The draft REE Action Plan cites the lead rationale for a robust REE program as “.....*in order to out-innovate, out-educate and out-build the rest of the world.*” While this is an important objective that has appeal to the food and agricultural sector itself, there are fundamental challenges that go beyond the realm of competition that merit recognition and inclusion in making the case for science action for the broader audience of society and policy makers. It also begs the question about the role of the private vs. public sector in committing to investments. For example—
 - How does our nation invest in the science needed to do our part in helping feed a global population that is projected to grow to 9 billion people in the not too distant future?
 - How do we develop the science needed to achieve other goals expected and demanded of the food and agriculture sector, like biofuels, conservation, nutrition, food safety and environmental protection?
 - How do we develop the science needed to sustain the natural resource base upon which agriculture depends while achieving all the other goals?

While more comprehensive goals are briefly referenced when stating the need for a “new compact with America,” the best possible case needs to be made as a central premise of the action plan.

- Recommend adding the following to the REE “Guiding Principles”—
 - We engage our many customers-those stakeholders who need the REE outcomes we work to produce-and listen carefully to their input in shaping our priorities (Customers include-other USDA mission areas, Congress, food and ag organizations, etc.).
 - We engage the private sector that conducts REE to maximize efficiencies, etc....[*appropriate role and resources required from public \$ investments that otherwise wouldn't happen. Ag Approps Subc Chair King's questions not isolated. Key in articulating role and resources needed.*]
- In each section where REE “Role” is identified, consider including—
 - What is the goal? For example, for development of next generation of scientists, how do we quantify how many scientists, etc. needed?
 - Desired outcomes?
 - Benchmarks? How to define success or progress toward success?
- For each “Actionable Item”—
 - How much \$ needed?

- How many years?
- Rural Prosperity Challenge—Articulate why it is important to revitalize rural America. Infrastructure needed to support production ag or ??? How much is it going to cost to do what's proposed? Goals? Benchmarks (addressed pretty well as indicators?)? Or could it be less costly to allow continued out-migration to where there are already jobs and infrastructure? It may be heartless sounding, but we need to articulate why it matters, and consequences of failing to invest adequately in REE for this purpose.
- The Fundamentals—Crop and Livestock Production—doesn't appear until the last goal, #11. In terms of presenting an Action Plan, the top priorities should be listed up front. Both substance and optics are important factors in the decision process
- There may be a number of valid reasons why USDA is unable to give full voice to making the case for funding levels. However, USDA can and should provide the best analysis possible about the resources needed to accomplish identified priorities to stakeholders and budget decision makers.

National C-FAR believes it is imperative to lay the groundwork now to respond to the many challenges and promising opportunities ahead through federal policies and programs needed to promote the long-term health and vitality of food and agriculture for the benefit of both consumers and producers. Stronger public investment in food and agricultural REE is essential in producing research outcomes needed to help deliver beneficial and timely solutions on a sustainable basis. The potential payoff is enormous for both Americans' health and the nation's economy.

National C-FAR and others in the stakeholder community bear a commensurate responsibility in articulating needs and making the case for increased funding. It is incumbent on USDA, stakeholders in the REE and "customer" communities, and the Congress to find the will and a way to increase investments in this vital mission area and turn our shared hope into an operational reality.

National C-FAR looks forward to working with the Under Secretary-Chief Scientist, the Administration and the Congress to help ensure that the USDA REE mission and implementing roadmap and action plan receive the funding needed to achieve scientific outcomes that are necessary for the food and agricultural sector to address multiple societal demands, challenges and expectations.

Sincerely,



R. Thomas Van Arsdall, Executive Director