

July 16, 2014

Congresswoman Suzan DelBene
318 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: USDA-ARS Plan for Prosser, WA, Research Unit

Delivered via electronic mail

Dear Congresswoman DelBene:

We are writing to ask for your assistance in halting a plan that would greatly diminish the research capacity at a Prosser, WA, research unit currently operated by the Agriculture Research Service (ARS) and Washington State University. On Friday, June 20, 2014, the area director of the USDA-ARS Pacific West Area submitted a plan that would remove this unit as a critical component of our state's public research infrastructure. If implemented, this plan could have grave impacts on Washington's agricultural producers. The Prosser unit has a rich history in delivering region-specific research that has been paramount to the success of area producers, their markets, and the state's broader agricultural economy.

Our first concern is the short timeframe for responding to this plan. The announcement came just before the Fourth of July holiday when many people take vacation and are away from email. Researchers need more time to review the plan and gather information about the potential impacts of these changes. Commodity groups affected by this plan are also requesting more time to review and respond to the plan.

This year marks the Prosser unit's 50th anniversary. In that time, scientists based there have managed active crop enhancement and breeding programs in tomatoes, potatoes, alfalfa, peas, and beans. The dry bean and snap bean research program has released more than 20 plant varieties that are specifically adapted to the region's growing conditions and climate, and are still grown on sizeable acreage in the Pacific Northwest (and across the country). The tomato, potato, and alfalfa programs are credited for addressing some of the region's most economically important pests and diseases.

If the plan moves forward, the Prosser USDA team will lose critical scientist mass for carrying out high-impact research. There are dozens of cutting-edge and long-term research programs at this unit that support the region's agricultural economy, health of our natural resources, and next generation of researchers, including graduate students. These programs provide good, unbiased research that serves the public good.

This announcement provides an important opportunity to assess our nation's current public research infrastructure, which has dramatically dwindled over the last 30 years. We recognize financial constraints, yet prioritizing funding for key regions, research units, and other programs will be essential to reversing this problematic trend.

Congress has 30 days (from June 20, 2014) to respond to this plan. If no action is taken, the proposal will be finalized effective November 2, 2014. The plan will impact a number of scientists and members of the technical support team. Some scientists will be relocated out of state, while others will remain but report to other units in Washington. Some research will be terminated altogether, including important research that support Washington potato, pea, and bean producers. In short, this USDA research wing will lose its identity, visibility, and support.

We hope you will respond to USDA-ARS's proposal by Friday, July 18. Specifically, we hope you will ask for more time to respond to the plan. This will allow for more public engagement in the planning process, including input from the region's commodity groups, researchers, and agricultural producers most impacted by the proposed plan.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this request. Please let us know how we can support your efforts.

Sincerely,

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Organic Seed Alliance
Port Townsend, WA

Joel Wachs
Washington State Farmers Market Association
Seattle, WA

Mary Embleton
Cascade Harvest Coalition
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