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A New Farm Bill, Research Structure at USDA

MEGAN DEBRANSKI KELHART

The significant challenges facing national food, fiber, and bioenergy systems call for a robust agricultural research system, whether for addressing food safety, security, and availability; thwarting disruptions to food supplies; or managing agricultural and natural resource systems. The federal framework supporting the agricultural research infrastructure was recently changed in an effort to meet those challenges.

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (also known simply as the Farm Bill, or PL 110-234) is a more than \$300 billion response to the range of issues concerning agricultural systems, including research. The new law aims to streamline and boost funding to “ensure the technological superiority of American agriculture,” according to the USDA Research, Education, and Economics Task Force appointed by the secretary of agriculture in 2003 at the request of Congress.

Upon passage of the bipartisan measure, House Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson (D-MN) and ranking member Bob Goodlatte (R-VA) jointly stated, “While no one got everything they wanted in this Farm Bill, we struck a balance that meets the pressing needs of working American families struggling with high food prices and that supports America’s farmers and ranchers as they continue to provide a safe, abundant, homegrown supply of food and fiber while protecting our natural resources and developing new sources of renewable energy.”

Ian Maw, vice president of food, agriculture, and natural resources at the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, echoed the sentiments of congressional leaders. “We view this as a real win,” Maw told *Science* magazine.

According to Representative Peterson, the Farm Bill will “reinvigorate national investment in agricultural research by creating NIFA [National Institute of Food and Agriculture], address the growing list of needs in agricultural research, extension and education for food and agricultural sciences, and increase research for renewable fuels, feed stocks and energy efficiency.”

NIFA’s establishment sets in motion the recommendations of the USDA Research, Education, and Economics Task Force. After reviewing the purpose, efficiency, and effectiveness of the Agricultural Research Service, the task force called for the creation of one or more national research institutions. The mission the task force envisioned for NIFA was “to support the highest caliber of fundamental agricultural research in order to, among other things, increase the international competitiveness of American agriculture; improve food safety and food security by protecting American plants and animals from insects, diseases, and the threat of bioterrorism; enhance agricultural sustainability and improve the environment; decrease American dependence on foreign sources of petroleum by developing bio-based fuels and materials from plants; and strengthen national security by improving the agricultural productivity of subsistence farmers in developing countries to combat hunger and the political instability it produces.”

The task force modeled NIFA on the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation, recommending that “NIFA should accomplish its mission by awarding competitive peer-reviewed grants that support and promote the very highest caliber of fundamental agricultural research.” NIFA replaces the USDA’s Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension

Service. The head of NIFA will be “a distinguished scientist” appointed by the president for a six-year term on the basis of recommendations from the National Academy of Sciences, a mechanism intended to ensure that the agency serves science rather than political interests.

NIFA will house what some describe as the United States’ premier agricultural research program, the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI). AFRI will provide competitive grants to colleges and universities, agricultural experiment stations, and other organizations conducting research in priority areas. Authorized at \$700 million per fiscal year, the AFRI budget is \$200 million more than the authorization for the National Research Initiative (NRI), the extramural, competitive grants program it is replacing. However, the NRI budget currently receives only \$180 million each year.

Despite the apparent strides made in the Farm Bill toward boosting agricultural research funding, Tom Van Arsdall, executive director of the National Coalition for Food and Agricultural Research, remains guarded about the future. “In terms of funding, this Farm Bill arguably took a step backward in terms of mandatory research funding. Hopefully the NIFA and AFRI reforms laid the groundwork for future increases in the appropriations process. Only time—and a great deal of effort—will tell.”

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