Dear Congressional leaders:

We write to strongly encourage you to include funding for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to support specific types of research important to addressing COVID-19 and its impacts on U.S. food and farm systems, including further research on the biological, economic, social, and environmental impacts of the virus.

While the CARES Act (H.R. 748) provided $1.3 billion for “research and related activities” at several federal science agencies to help the U.S. response to COVID-19, food and agriculture research at the USDA was not included. This gap in funding must be addressed, especially given that USDA-supported research has been immediately instrumental in tackling past outbreaks and is essential to the U.S. response and recovery from COVID-19.
Battling the COVID-19 global pandemic requires an “all hands on deck” approach by the science community that includes USDA working alongside its sister federal agencies, the National Science Foundation (NSF), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Department of Energy (DOE), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the U.S. Forest Service (FS).

USDA research can play a powerful role in protecting all of us from coronavirus and its impacts, and ultimately save lives and livelihoods. USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) has a long history of harnessing the immense scientific power of the nation’s universities and colleges to drive our understanding of rapidly emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases and provide timely solutions to curb their impact. More USDA research could be directly relevant to helping the federal government treat the disease, develop vaccines, and be better prepared in the future.

Additional research, education and extension initiatives across the USDA are also crucial to understanding and communicating challenges and opportunities across the food and farm system. Such efforts are essential in rapidly changing and uncertain times, and necessary to enabling and supporting resiliency. Immediate, real-time research, as well as longer term studies, are needed now to ensure that the entire agricultural system – farmers, farmworkers, grocery stores, local and regional food markets – is able to adapt to and recover from the health and economic impacts of COVID-19.

Therefore, we recommend the following urgent investments in USDA food and agricultural research:

*Provide $75 million to fund the USDA’s Rapid Response to Novel Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) Impacts Across Food and Agriculture Systems program area and create new research priority areas. Additionally, provide $1 million to assist in administration of these grants.*

On April 17, 2020, NIFA announced a Rapid Response to Novel Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) Impacts Across Food and Agriculture Systems program area within AFRI that would focus on four research priority areas: health and security of livestock; well-being of farm, food service providers, and rural Americans; economic security; and food safety. We appreciate NIFA announcing its intent to fast-track COVID-19 related research and strongly encourage funding be provided to help create research priority areas that include data-related technologies and focus not only on results for immediate deployment, but also for recovery and response to potential biological, social, and environmental implications of the pandemic in food and agriculture systems.

USDA research has helped us understand the biology of past coronaviruses and could be directly relevant to helping the federal government treat the current disease, develop vaccines, and be better prepared in the future. Furthermore, understanding the economic and social implications of this pandemic is essential to supporting beginning and socially-disadvantaged farmers in adapting, particularly given their vulnerabilities to market shocks. Lastly, it’s critical that NIFA encourage proposals that are developed in partnership with farmers and that focus on sustainable agriculture.

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1. U.S. Department of Agriculture. National Institute of Food and Agriculture Impacts
(such as in the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Extension Partnership grants) to ensure farmers are provided the resources they need to continue investing in longer-term resilience during and after the pandemic.

The CARES Act provided the National Science Foundation with $75 million for its rapid response grants program and $1 million for administration of those grants to fast track real-time research into better understanding the cellular, physiological, and ecological levels of coronavirus. Therefore, we request a similar amount of funding for AFRI’s rapid response program area in the next stimulus package.

Provide $30 million to support and expand NIFA’s Tactical Sciences Initiative.

This initiative provides essential solutions to coronavirus challenges to crop and livestock producers that are critically important to our nation’s farm economy. The Tactical Sciences for Agricultural Biosecurity program area priority of AFRI focuses on increasing national capacity to prevent, rapidly detect, and respond to biologic threats to U.S. agriculture and our food supply. Supported activities are aimed at increasing agricultural biosecurity at the regional and national levels, and across the public and private sectors. At present the program supports detection and diagnostics of transboundary and emerging pests and diseases associated with animal and plant production systems; however, key elements of U.S. food systems are not addressed. Considering the current crises, expansion of the initiative should include biologic risks, such as the novel coronavirus. Work should be expanded to include biological threats to farmers and farmworkers, biosecurity and worker health and safety protocols in food processing, and threats to food handling, distribution and transportation.

Provide $25 million for USDA’s Extension Disaster Education Network.

The Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN) is a collaborative national effort by land-grant universities and the Cooperative Extension Services across the country administered by NIFA to improve the delivery of services to citizens affected by disasters. Its mission is to build working relationships with local and state emergency management networks, provide educational programs on disaster preparation and mitigation, assume locally appropriate roles during disasters, and collaborate in recovery efforts. In recent years, member institutions of EDEN have taken on increasing roles to improve quality of life and responses in limited resource and farming communities, where disaster often hits hardest. Given the scope and scale of the current crisis, additional funds for this program are needed to help farmers manage their food businesses as the supply chain is disrupted or if they, their employees, or communities are infected with the virus. In addition, EDEN is providing adapted educational materials and resources to connect with students who are dislocated from their schools during the crisis. EDEN helps connect individuals at risk with critical information on everything from filing for unemployment to ways to eat healthy and safely during the pandemic. The work EDEN does is essential to helping create more resilient communities and to strengthen response to the COVID pandemic.

Provide $10 million for the Economic Research Service to assess agronomic, economic, social, and food-supply chain issues arising as a result of COVID-19.

We are already seeing negative economic impacts across the entire food and agricultural system. Research on those impacts now can help to provide stability during the pandemic and to inform recovery efforts. ERS’s high-quality, objective research informs public and private decision-making on issues in agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America -- and is precisely what’s needed at this time of crisis.

ERS researchers can evaluate COVID-19 impacts on food safety, food prices, household food expenditures, food insecurity, and utilization of nutrition assistance programs, which can be used by policymakers to help those facing hunger. Furthermore, ERS researchers are well-equipped to assess how farm prices and incomes, and planting and other management decisions, are being impacted by the pandemic and any associated impacts on the food supply chain and economy. Lastly, there would also be value to having ERS economists collaborate across the USDA to conduct interdisciplinary research on how COVID-19 is impacting the food system broadly.

Provide $5 million for the Agricultural Marketing Service to conduct applied research, virtual outreach and distance learning.

This funding could help farmers, food businesses and food market managers respond more successfully to severe disruptions in food supply chains resulting from the COVID-19 crisis. Such funding would allow the AMS to provide greater public access to its unique professional expertise that is pertinent to the current needs of agricultural producers, distributors, buyers and consumers.

Provide $10 million to maintain, adapt, and/or rebuild staff and projects for ongoing USDA intramural research projects and activities disrupted by COVID-19.

We ask that the USDA Agriculture Research Service, the Economic Research Service and the National Agricultural Statistics Service receive commensurate funding to continue data-collection and other activities for any projects that are disrupted by the pandemic due to lab closures, travel restrictions, and other health and safety measures.\(^5\) Congress must provide funding to support disrupted research projects to ensure projects can be continued or completed.

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic will require Congress to provide the entire scientific community with the funding and resources it needs to adapt and recover. Therefore, we strongly encourage you to include agriculture and food research in future stimulus packages.

Thank you for your leadership during this time of crisis.

American Society for Microbiology  
American Society for Nutrition  
American Society of Animal Science  
Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges  
Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA)

\(^5\) [https://www.ars.usda.gov/pacific-west-area/davis-ca/whnrc/](https://www.ars.usda.gov/pacific-west-area/davis-ca/whnrc/)
Delta Land & Community
Entomological Society of America
Farm to Table New Mexico
Institute of Food Technologists
Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future
Kansas Rural Center
Montana Organic Association
National Association for the Advancement of Animal Science
National Coalition for Food and Agricultural Research
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
New Mexico Food & Agriculture Policy Council
Oregon Tilth
Organic Farming Research Foundation
Organic Seed Alliance
Pasa Sustainable Agriculture
Union of Concerned Scientists
Virginia Association for Biological Farming