

September 9, 2025

The Honorable Brooke Rollins
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Rollins,

We commend your acknowledgement of research and innovation as key priorities in the National Farm Security Action Plan released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on July 8, 2025.¹ The report underscores the importance of strengthening American agricultural productivity and proposes USDA partnership with “the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and other Federal research agencies to ensure agricultural projects they fund promote military readiness, protect U.S. plants and animals, and enhance agricultural security.” The undersigned agricultural innovation stakeholders recognize USDA’s Agriculture Advanced Research and Development Authority (AGARDA) as the ideal agency to lead this effort.

AGARDA was established in the 2018 Farm Bill to support high-risk, high-reward research to address the greatest challenges facing the food and agriculture system. Since its authorization, AGARDA has received several million dollars in funding. While insufficient to support ARPA-caliber research, this funding could be utilized to appoint an Interim Acting Director. The authorizing statute for AGARDA directs the Secretary of Agriculture to appoint a Director for AGARDA to, among other duties, accelerate advanced research and development by collaborating with other agencies.² In addition, the Director should work with external partners, including land grant universities and private industry, to initiate cutting-edge projects through research planning grants that utilize the unique structure of AGARDA’s transaction authorities and technology transfer agreements.

Other ARPA-style agencies have previously supported a limited number of research projects on agriculture issues that are cross-cutting with their own agency missions. For example, ARPA-E’s TERRA and ROOTS programs focused on improving bioenergy crops³ and developing new crop varieties that improve soil quality, reduce the need for irrigation, and reduce nitrous oxide emissions.⁴ At DOD, the DARPA Biological Technologies Office is seeking proposals that catalyze innovation in agricultural defense throughout the supply chain.⁵ USDA should

¹ <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/farm-security-nat-sec.pdf>

² 7 U.S.C. § 3319k(b)(4)(C)

³ <https://arpa-e.energy.gov/programs-and-initiatives/view-all-programs/terra>

⁴ <https://arpa-e.energy.gov/programs-and-initiatives/view-all-programs/roots>

⁵ <https://www.darpa.mil/research/programs/ag-bto/>

collaborate with DARPA to review proposals and inform the subsequent development of future agricultural defense research programs.

Agricultural defense is not the only area that requires investment to ensure the U.S. food supply remains secure, abundant, and globally competitive. USDA's National Farm Security Action Plan states that "agricultural research, development, and innovation are the cornerstones of U.S. dominance in the global agricultural sector." The undersigned organizations agree with this assessment and believe AGARDA should be stood up as USDA's permanent advanced research agency to spearhead high-impact solutions that are understudied in the private sector. Advanced research topics could include, but are not limited to, technologies that enable automated, passive monitoring of known and emerging livestock and crop diseases⁶; precision technologies that can manage crop or livestock production inputs at a heightened level of spatial and temporal granularity; or paradigm-shifting applications of genetic engineering that enhance crop productivity and stress tolerance.⁷

USDA should take every opportunity to collaborate with DARPA, ARPA-E, and other Federal research agencies to advance AGARDA's statutory objective: delivering transformative scientific solutions to high priority agricultural challenges. We respectfully encourage USDA to appoint an Interim Acting Director for AGARDA to strategically deploy funding that has already been appropriated and coordinate research objectives with other research agencies. For those research objectives that do not merit enough mission overlap to justify sharing resources with other agencies, AGARDA should lead the way.

In light of the growing threats posed by adversarial nations like China, we applaud USDA for recognizing its role in safeguarding American interests—not just in agriculture, but in national security. Advanced research in plant and animal diseases, food systems resilience, and supply chain integrity is no longer optional; it is a strategic necessity. The United States cannot afford to fall behind in critical areas where foreign powers are aggressively investing and expanding their influence. Standing up AGARDA will demonstrate USDA's commitment to prioritizing innovation and fortifying our agricultural infrastructure to ensure that America remains secure in the face of global challenges.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Agricultural & Applied Economics Association
American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges

⁶ <https://ifp.org/the-case-for-agarda/>

⁷ <https://ifp.org/unlocking-american-agricultural-innovation/>

American Conservation Coalition
American Feed Industry Association
American Institute of Biological Sciences
American Seed Trade Association
American Society for Horticultural Science
American Society of Agronomy
American Society of Animal Science
Bipartisan Policy Center Action
C3 Solutions
Clearpath Action
Colorado State University
Crop Science Society of America
Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative
Engineering Biology Research Consortium (EBRC)
Enhanced Weathering Alliance
Entomological Society of America
Environmental Policy Innovation Center
Farm Journal Foundation
Federation of American Scientists
Institute for Progress
National Coalition for Food and Agricultural Research
National Corn Growers Association
National Hemp Association
Pet Food Institute
Soil Science Society of America
Synergistic Hawaii Agriculture Council
The Breakthrough Institute
The Good Food Institute
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