

Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) Coalition

March 24, 2023

The Honorable Martin Heinrich, Chair
Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Hoeven, Ranking Member
Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Andy Harris, Chair
Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Sanford Bishop, Ranking Member
Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Heinrich, Ranking Member Hoeven, Chair Harris, and Ranking Member Bishop:

Thank you for your leadership of the House and Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittees in the 118th Congress. The AFRI Coalition, along with the undersigned organizations, look forward to working with all of you in FY 2024 and beyond.

The Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) Coalition is comprised of research institutions, scientific societies, and other food and agricultural stakeholders. Working together, we advocate for increased investments in AFRI, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) flagship competitive grants program for fundamental and applied research, extension, and education in support of our nation's interconnected food and agricultural systems.

We are grateful for the \$455 million provided for AFRI in FY 2023. **For FY 2024, we respectfully request an appropriation of no less than \$500 million for AFRI.** This funding level for the program is needed to invest in crucial areas aimed at addressing our nation's most urgent and pressing food, agriculture, and public health challenges. AFRI-funded research supports supply chain resiliency, bioenergy, nutrition and wellness, agricultural technology, rural economic prosperity, climate change adaptation and mitigation, equity across the food system, food safety and traceability, and a diverse research workforce.

USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) administers AFRI, the USDA's largest competitive extramural research grant program. The program's flexibility has allowed NIFA to quickly respond to unforeseen challenges, such as COVID-19 pandemic, by supporting timely research and education. Growing inflation, food insecurity, and supply chain disruptions have all been felt throughout the food and agriculture sector as a result of the ongoing pandemic. AFRI is uniquely suited to address many of these challenges through transdisciplinary research, which allows researchers across disciplines to examine issues in a systematic way rather than in silos. For example, the Sustainable Agriculture Systems (SAS) AFRI program funds projects at the intersection of food production, climate and the environment, and nutrition, with a focus on health equity, providing critical support to research

that can address these challenges synergistically.¹

AFRI not only helps our farmers and food producers to mitigate the impacts of these challenges, but also contributes to building solutions. There is no doubt that food and agriculture systems will face future challenges as a result of climate-related events. Increasingly erratic fluctuations in growing seasons and temperature extremes, droughts, and flooding impact human and animal health, and the environment in unprecedented and often negative ways. These changes can exacerbate issues associated with water quality, foodborne pathogens, and vector-borne infectious disease. Research is already beginning to show that the nutritional quality of crops has declined with warming temperatures.²

American farmers and ranchers stand to benefit from research that improves seed adaptability and increases productivity to help farmers, especially historically underserved farmers, remain competitive on the global scale. Additionally, investments at AFRI can help us meaningfully track progress towards climate goals through US agriculture by improving the protocols, tools, and technologies we use to measure, monitor, and verify greenhouse gas emissions and soil carbon sequestration. But basic research, development, and scaled implementation of technologies requires investment. Unfortunately, despite incremental increases in AFRI funding, roughly 70 percent of AFRI proposals that are deemed worthy by expert review panels are not funded,³ simply because of insufficient funding.

Food and agriculture is the third largest direct contributor to the U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) after healthcare and housing.⁴ However, this is not reflected in recent food and agriculture research investments. Agricultural and food research funding at the USDA has remained fairly flat over the last fifty years.⁵ In contrast, countries such as China, India, and Brazil have steadily increased their funding into agriculture, and since 2010, China's public funding of agricultural research has surpassed all countries.⁶ The stagnation, or rather, decline in U.S. public funding of food and agriculture research risks our competitiveness, limits potential for long-term cutting edge scientific discoveries in human and animal health, and compromises the next generation talent pipeline.

The AFRI Coalition remains committed to our longstanding goal of garnering the \$700 million authorized funding level for AFRI, while still investing in other vital research, education, and extension programs across NIFA. The coalition strongly believes increases in AFRI funding should not come at the expense of other competitive and capacity programs within NIFA. Sustained funding across the food and agricultural research enterprise is needed to ensure our global competitiveness and national security. Robust investment in USDA-supported research is also needed to attract, retain, and develop the next generation of scientists from diverse backgrounds to address increasing pressures on our natural resources and advance innovations benefiting all Americans.

¹ <https://nifa.usda.gov/program/afri-sas>

² Ortiz-Bobea, A., Ault, T.R., Carrillo, C.M. *et al.* Anthropogenic climate change has slowed global agricultural productivity growth. *Nat. Clim. Chang.* 11, 306–312 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-021-01000-1>

³ <https://nifa.usda.gov/afri-annual-review-archives>

⁴ <https://www.ift.org/-/media/policy-advocacy/files/ift-whitepaper-012720final.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/>

⁶ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2022/june/investment-in-u-s-public-agricultural-research-and-development-has-fallen-by-a-third-over-past-two-decades-lags-major-trade-competitors/>

Thank you for your strong support of AFRI and previous efforts to increase AFRI funding. We urge you to invest in our country's future by providing no less than \$500 million for AFRI in FY 2024.

Sincerely,

The AFRI Coalition:

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
American Association of Mycobacterial Diseases
American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges
American Dairy Science Association
American Institute of Biological Sciences
American Public and Land-grant Universities
American Seed Trade Association
American Society for Horticultural Science
American Society for Microbiology
American Society for Nutrition
American Society of Agronomy
American Society of Plant Biologists
Association of American Universities
Carbon180
Crop Science Society of America
Ecological Society of America
Entomological Society of America
Farm Journal Foundation
FASS
Friends of the Mississippi River
Institute of Food Technologists
Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association
Mycobacterial Diseases of Animals – Multistate Initiative
National Association of State Departments of Agriculture
National Cattlemen's Beef Association
National Coalition for Food and Agricultural Research
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
New Entry Sustainable Farming Project
North American Meat Institute
Soil Science Society of America
Supporters of Agricultural Research (SoAR) Foundation
Synergistic Hawaii Agriculture Council
The Breakthrough Institute
The Good Food Institute
US Dairy Forage Research Center Stakeholder Committee
Virginia Association for Biological Farming