

# Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) Coalition

December 9, 2020

Dear President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris:

The AFRI Coalition applauds your commitment to an equitable, clean energy economy and your vocal support of science, including mitigating the impacts of climate change, building strong domestic supply chains, and addressing the COVID-19 pandemic head-on. We wish to work with you and your administration to strengthen federal investments in USDA's Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) housed in the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). AFRI supports research on climate adaptation and resiliency, economic prosperity in rural communities, food safety and quality, nutrition, bioenergy, agricultural technology, and plant and animal health.

The nation's sustained recovery hinges on our ability to fight immediate and long-term challenges in food and agriculture from crumbling infrastructure to climate change. Competitive agricultural research programs build on each other's successes and, if provided adequate funding and needed infrastructure improvements, can foster bold innovations to benefit all Americans. We urge your administration to consider the following recommendations:

- Provide robust funding for AFRI in the president's FY22 Budget Request to make strides in reaching the program's authorized funding level of \$700 million. Only 664 of the highest-ranked AFRI applications were funded in FY16. An additional 757 proposals rated as Outstanding, High Priority, and/or Medium Priority could not be awarded due to lack of funding<sup>1</sup>
- Invest in research infrastructure that will enable universities across the nation to continue to train and retain leading scientists in food and agriculture
- Appoint a scientist for the Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics at USDA
- Appoint a NIFA director as soon as possible to bolster the agency's scientific capacity
- Ensure food and agricultural research is represented in the priorities of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and that agricultural scientists are appointed to the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology to foster cross-agency collaboration and opportunities
- Work with Congress to increase the allocation (302(b)) for the Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittees

During the COVID19 pandemic, NIFA has awarded \$13 million in competitive grants through the AFRI program to support research or extension activities that focus on developing and deploying rapid, reliable, and readily adoptable COVID-19 agricultural strategies across the food and agriculture supply chains.

Even before the pandemic, in the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress recognized the need for additional agricultural, food, and nutrition research with the authorization of the Agriculture Advanced Research and Development Authority (AGARDA) pilot. Inspired by DARPA, AGARDA is a competitive grant program administered by the Office of the Chief Scientist at USDA to address emergent threats to the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://nifa.usda.gov/afri-annual-review-funding-portfolio>

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agriculture sector. It is aimed at fostering high-risk, high-reward research to protect U.S. food and agriculture.

Investments in AFRI and other competitive research programs at USDA are especially critical as you work to foster economic growth and fight an unprecedented pandemic. We are thankful for your commitment to science and its importance to addressing national challenges in food and agriculture.

Sincerely,

The AFRI Coalition

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*The AFRI Coalition is comprised of organizations representing research institutions, scientific societies, and other food and agricultural stakeholders. Together, we advocate for robust research investments in AFRI, USDA's flagship competitive grants program for fundamental and applied research, extension, and education in support of our nation's food and agricultural systems.*