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U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Research Service (ARS) plant physiologist Franck Dayan observes wild-type and herbicide-resistant biotypes of Palmer Amaranth (pigweed) as Mississippi State University graduate student, Daniela Ribeiro collects samples for DNA analysis at the ARS Natural Products Utilization Research Unit in Oxford, MS on July 20, 2011. USDA photo by Stephen Ausmus. Photo: Stephen Ausmus, USDA/CC BY 2.0 (Flickr)

Is Scientific Integrity Safe at the USDA?

KAREN PERRY STILLERMAN, SENIOR ANALYST, FOOD AND ENVIRONMENT | AUGUST 15, 2018, 11:38 AM EDT



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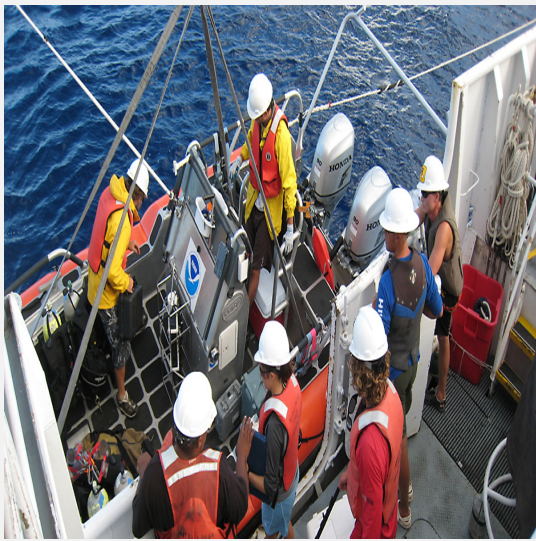


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This post is a part of a series on
[Scientist Survey 2018](#)

Science is critical to everything the US Department of Agriculture does—helping farmers produce a safe, abundant food supply, protecting our soil and water for the future, and advising all of us about good nutrition to stay healthy. I recently wrote about the Trump administration’s new USDA chief scientist nominee, Scott Hutchins, and the [conflicts he would bring](#) from a career narrowly focused on developing pesticides for Dow.

But meanwhile, Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue last week abruptly [announced](#) a proposed reorganization of the USDA’s research agencies. This move has implications for whoever takes up the post of chief scientist—as do new survey findings [released yesterday](#), which suggest that the Trump administration is already having detrimental effects on science and scientists at the USDA.

An attack on science, and a shrinking portfolio for the next chief scientist

The job for which Scott Hutchins (and [this guy](#) before him) has been nominated is actually a multi-pronged position. The under secretary is responsible for overseeing the four agencies that currently make up the USDA’s [Research, Education, and Economics \(REE\) mission area](#): the Agricultural Research Service, the Economic Research Service (ERS), the National Agricultural

Statistics Service, and the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA). Collectively, these agencies carry out or facilitate nearly \$3 billion worth of research on food and agriculture topics every year. In addition, the REE under secretary is the USDA's designated chief scientist, overseeing the [Office of the Chief Scientist](#), established by Congress in 2008 to “provide strategic coordination of the science that informs the Department’s and the Federal government’s decisions, policies and regulations that impact all aspects of U.S. food and agriculture and related landscapes and communities.” OCS and the chief scientist are also responsible for [ensuring scientific integrity](#) across the department.

Altogether, it’s no small job, but it may soon get smaller. Secretary Perdue’s unexpected [reorganization proposal](#) last week would pluck ERS figuratively from within REE and place it in the Secretary’s office. Perdue’s announcement also included a plan to *literally* move ERS, along with NIFA, to as-yet-undetermined locations outside the DC area.

Perdue’s proposal cited lower rents and better opportunities to recruit agricultural specialists. But that rationale [sounds fishy to UCS](#) and [other observers](#), as well as former USDA staff (the most recent NIFA administrator had [this unvarnished reaction](#)) and current staff who were [caught by surprise](#). The move looks suspiciously like subordinating science to politics, likely giving big agribusiness and its boosters in farm-state universities ever more influence over the direction of USDA research that really should be driven by the public interest. Moreover, on the heels of a White House proposal earlier this year to cut the ERS budget in half—which Congress has thus far ignored—Perdue’s “relocate or leave” plan for ERS staff sure seems like a back-door way to gut the agency’s capacity.

New USDA scientist survey findings give more cause for concern

Even before announcements of a conflicted chief scientist nominee and ill-

conceived reorganization, things weren't exactly rosy for those working within REE agencies. In a [survey](#) conducted in February and March and released by UCS yesterday, scientists and economists in ARS, ERS, NASS, and NIFA raised concerns about the effects of political interference, budget cuts, and staff reductions. In partnership with Iowa State University's Center for Survey Statistics and Methodology, we asked more than 63,000 federal scientists across 16 government agencies about scientific integrity, agency effectiveness, and the working environment for scientists in the first year of the Trump administration. At the USDA, we sent the survey to more than 3,600 scientists, economists, and statisticians we identified in the four REE agencies; about [7 percent](#) (n=258) responded.

Among the findings summarized in our [USDA-specific fact sheet](#) are that scientists:

- Face restrictions on communicating their work—78 percent said they must obtain agency preapproval to communicate with journalists; and
- Report workforce reductions are a problem—90 percent say they've noticed such reductions in their agencies. And of those, 92 percent say short-staffing is making it harder for the USDA to fulfill its science-based mission.

To sum up: the next USDA chief scientist will lead a shrinking, under-resourced, and somewhat demoralized cadre of scientists facing political interference and possibly increased influence from industry (a trend we are [already seeing in the Trump/Perdue USDA](#)). All this at a time when the department really needs to advance research that can help farmers meet the myriad challenges they face and safeguard the future of our food system.

Soon, I'll follow up with questions the Senate might want to ask Scott Hutchins—in light of all this and his own chemical industry baggage—when they hold his confirmation hearing.

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