

2021 North Dakota State Legislature

Senate Appropriations Committee – Written testimony for:

Jan. 20, 2 pm hearing: *Main Research Center and branch research centers*

January 18, 2021

To the Honorable Senator Holmberg, Chairman:

We are writing in support of the restoration of full funding for agricultural research in North Dakota and particularly North Dakota State University's Williston Research and Extension Center (WREC). While we fully understand the need to keep budgets lean - particularly now as the nation faces the dire economic complexities created by the Covid-19 pandemic – ongoing cuts to the state's agricultural research programs do more harm than good given the **large, long-term net returns they provide to the North Dakota economy and its citizens**. As evidence:

- A recent study by NDSU economists determined that every tax dollar invested in ag research generated as much as \$25 in return, while a third party study by the University of Minnesota showed an even larger economic return, \$38 for every \$1 invested in ag research. A Cornell University study reports similar positive returns for agricultural research being conducted at the federal level.
- Given that agriculture is the leading revenue-producing industry in North Dakota, accounting for about one-fourth of the state's economic base, cuts to these important support programs are not only detrimental for North Dakota's farmers and ranchers, but to the state's economy as a whole. And that's not even considering the trials the state's farmers and ranchers were already grappling with before the pandemic: trade wars, low prices, erratic markets and now drought.

But despite the hardships, support for agricultural research remains high among producers and industry who have made significant contributions to new programs and facilities at WREC. Fundraising efforts to date for new horizontal seed conditioning and greenhouse facilities have collected \$1.9 million and \$400,000 in contributions, respectively, allowing construction to begin on the seed facility, which will provide new value added feedstocks for many crops grown in the region.

Cuts in aid will drastically impact these new infrastructure assets and other new and existing research efforts, and those cuts need not be large to have an outsized impact. A 5% reduction amounts to \$142,915, the equivalent of one WREC staff position, which can radically limit the Center's research program and also further stymie research needed in new areas such as the animal research and extension position being proposed as part of the lab's integrated cropping/livestock systems programs.

WREC has always made every effort to manage its budget judiciously, in part by nurturing close partnerships with two nearby, cross border ag research facilities - Montana State University's Eastern Agricultural Research Center (EARC) and our USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS) Northern Plains Agricultural Research Laboratory, both in Sidney, MT - providing even greater returns for producers in the region. As evidence:

- Our "**MonDak Agricultural Research Triangle**" allows all three of our research facilities to avoid duplication of research efforts and leverage expertise and equipment from all three for various individual as well as joint research projects.
- State researchers at NDSU also point to our partnership as **an important factor in successful grant applications** for new equipment and research programs at state facilities.
- Our longstanding partnership has led to significant advances for producers in the region and continues today with a joint research effort between ARS and WREC to investigate the effect of crop rotation on *Rhizoctonia solani* AG 2-2 soil populations. We've also initiated similar collaborations on economically important diseases of pulse crops and Fusarium Head Blight, a critically important disease of durum, wheat and barley. Additional greenhouse research space for this and other projects are of critical value to producers, particularly in this region as we're far removed from either state's major universities in an area with very different precipitation patterns, soil types and more. That latter results in unique challenges for producers here, meaning additional localized research is sorely needed, research that WREC and its partners provide.

#### **Need for increased agricultural research funding**

- The **semiarid climates in western ND and eastern MT mean very narrow operating margins** for producers, drastically limiting opportunities to "experiment" on their own farm operations - assuming they have the expertise to do so - to identify new crops, cropping rotations, and weed, pest and disease management options, and develop techniques to improve and protect water supply and quality as well as soil health and fertility, all of which are **needed to ensure a successful, sustainable farming operation**.
- As **ag commodity prices continue to skew lower** and changing weather patterns result in new crop weed, pests and diseases, ND farmers and ranchers need more help than ever to stay afloat.
- Continued cuts in ag research just don't make sense under these circumstances, and with Covid still lingering, ongoing support for agriculture remains a critical component of any revival of North Dakota's economy, and the nation's economy as well.

Our ARS Customer Focus Group in Sidney, which includes more than 80 farmers and ranchers and representatives from various ag industries and organizations across our two-state region, recognize the value of agricultural research to our industry and the economies of our respective states. (Note: Several of our members also serve on advisory groups for WREC and EARC.) We know from experience that investments in research pave the way for the future, particularly in agriculture. Consequently we respectfully request that you **maintain 100% funding for the Williston Research Extension Center**. The benefits of doing so far outweigh the costs.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Sidney ARS Customer Focus Group by:

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