Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

August 22, 2025

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

The Honorable Stephen Vaden
Deputy Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Rollins and Deputy Secretary Vaden,

We strongly oppose the USDA's proposed reorganization plan which includes the closure of the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC) in Beltsville, Maryland. For over 100 years, BARC has been an engine of agricultural research and innovation and the site of numerous research breakthroughs. BARC's unique capacity has made it the nation's premier agricultural research facility, and its closure would be deeply harmful to American farmers, as well as a waste of taxpayer dollars. We also have significant concerns about the lack of transparency and the legality of USDA's proposed plan. We urge you to keep BARC open and to provide a detailed accounting of the full impact of the proposed reorganization plan.

The plan to close BARC requires Congressional approval; moving forward without it would be illegal. Section 716 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2024 requires Congressional approval of USDA relocation and reorganization activities before any funding for such activity is obligated or expended through a reprogramming, transfer of funds, or reimbursement;[1] no such approval has been requested or granted. Since any action to carry out the proposed reorganization will undoubtedly require the obligation or expenditure described in Section 716, we expect USDA to seek Congressional approval before taking any final action on the proposed reorganization plan. Furthermore, we caution you that Section 750 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2024 prohibits USDA from moving any staff office from one mission area to another without enactment of specific legislation authorizing such a move.[2]

[1] Pub. L. No. 118-42, 138 Stat. 25 (Mar. 9, 2024). https://www.congress.gov/118/plaws/publ42/PLAW-118publ42.pdf
[2] Pub. L. No. 118-42, 138 Stat. 25 (Mar. 9, 2024). https://www.congress.gov/118/plaws/publ42/PLAW-118publ42.pdf

The plan to close BARC would waste federal resources. USDA has already invested more than $174 million in BARC facility upgrades and repairs;[3] abandoning a facility right after USDA has made such significant upgrades to it is illogical and wasteful. As one of the world's largest agricultural research complexes, relocating personnel, as well as all the lab and research equipment, will undoubtedly be a major expense. Furthermore, existing law prevents USDA from selling, leasing, excessing, surplussing or otherwise disposing of BARC land without the specific approval of Congress.[4] Lacking said Congressional approval, which USDA has not secured, the 6,500-acre facility must remain under USDA ownership and stewardship, even if USDA moves forward with the proposal to close BARC. Given USDA's significant investment in BARC, and the lack of Congressional approval for disposing of the property, closing this critical research facility amounts to an incredible waste of taxpayer dollars.

BARC is a world leader in agricultural research;[5] its closure will irreparably harm the United States' leadership in agricultural production and research. Established in 1910, BARC has been the site of numerous agricultural breakthroughs that have helped to make the United States an agricultural powerhouse – discoveries that have improved food safety, human health and nutrition, pest and disease control strategies, and agricultural production.[6] As the largest and most diversified agricultural research center in the world, BARC's agricultural research capacity is unparalleled.[7] Just as capacity was lost at USDA research agencies the last time a reorganization took place,[8] closing BARC, as USDA's preeminent agricultural research center, will undoubtedly result in a level of lost talent and expertise that will negatively impact American agricultural research – as well as agricultural production. Agricultural research is the backbone of American agricultural production; the innovation occurring at facilities like BARC is what helps ensure the continued competitiveness of American agriculture on the global stage. We are especially concerned about what lost capacity and expertise at BARC will mean for the future of the agriculture industries that are actively served by BARC research, including the poultry, dairy, soybean, and honeybee industries among many others.

BARC helps to train the next generation of agricultural researchers, on whom the future of American agricultural innovation depends. Maintaining a vibrant agricultural research workforce supports American agriculture. BARC already has an impressive track record of training new talent. As USDA itself has said: "Many laboratories in the Beltsville area have strong connections to nearby colleges and universities. In addition to forging research collaborations with scientists at these institutions, Beltsville advances STEM education by

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[3] 2026 USDA Explanatory Notes – Agricultural Research Service. Table ARS-21. Status of Construction. https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/20-2026-CJ-ARS.pdf

[4] Pub. L. No. 100-202, § 523, 101 Stat. 1329, 1329-417 (1987). https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-101/pdf/STATUTE-101-Pg1329.pdf#page=1

[5] "Beltsville Agricultural Research Center," United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service, Program Aid 1626. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-A-PURL-gpo57206/pdf/GOVPUB-A-PURL-gpo57206.pdf

[6] "Celebrating 100 Years of Beltsville Agricultural Research," United States Department of Agriculture, AgResearch Magazine. April 2010. https://agresearchmag.ars.usda.gov/2010/apr/research/

[7] "Celebrating 100 Years of Beltsville Agricultural Research," United States Department of Agriculture, AgResearch Magazine. April 2010. https://agresearchmag.ars.usda.gov/2010/apr/research/

[8] "Agency Relocations: Following Leading Practices Will Better Position USDA to Mitigate the Ongoing Impacts on Its Workforce," Government Accountability Office. GAO-23-104709 Jan 13, 2023. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-104709

hosting numerous student interns throughout the year. In 2023, researchers at BARC, BHNRC, and USNA mentored over 240 trainees at the high school, undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral level, supporting the development of early career STEM professionals. Through coordination with academic institutions, the Beltsville location plays an important role in supporting the next generation agricultural science leaders."[9]

BARC's geographic location provides unique benefits to American agricultural research that cannot be replicated elsewhere. Located close to freshwater and saltwater, mountains and costal lowlands, and situated within the fertile Piedmont Plateau, BARC is within reach of diverse landscapes and a range of climatic conditions. This geography makes it an ideal location for an agriculture research station and its proximity to the nation's capital allows BARC to take advantage of several key efficiencies. For example:

- BARC works closely with numerous federal agencies and universities in the Washington, D.C. area. BARC effectively leverages its own limited resources through collaborations and partnerships with these neighboring institutions, enabling the facility to cut costs and access a wide range of scientific expertise in a way that is not replicable outside of this region.
- Because of BARC's proximity to so many other scientific institutions, as well as its long history in Beltsville, there exists an ecosystem of support services that helps BARC run efficiently. From equipment installation and calibration to maintenance and repair – BARC's location allows it to easily access and share these types of support services that are already available in the greater Washington, D.C. area given the high density of scientific research that occurs there. In addition, the area has a large number of federal contractors who are skilled at supporting BARC's day-to-day operations.
- BARC's proximity to three major airports makes it accessible to collaborators and visitors from around the world and, as your own Department notes, "[BARC's] proximity to Washington D.C. makes it an optimal destination for congressional visits and agricultural demonstrations. Beltsville can provide a window into the full scope of ARS research for policymakers, stakeholders, and diplomats, right in the nation's capital. Strong ARS research capacity in the greater D.C. area brings food and agricultural issues to the forefront of federal policy and allows for improved coordination across agencies with related missions."[10]

BARC provides regionally-tailored research to the 83,000 farms throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed, the loss of which jeopardizes $10 billion in agricultural productivity. One of the stated goals in the July 24, 2025 Secretary Memorandum regarding the Department of Agriculture Reorganization Plan is to "bring USDA closer to its customers by relocating resources outside of the National Capital region." However, by eliminating BARC, what this plan actually does is eliminate the research hub serving the entire Northeast Region –

[9] "A Vision for Long-Term Scientific Leadership in Beltsville," USDA Agricultural Research Service, Beltsville Agricultural Research Center. January 31, 2025. https://www.ars.usda.gov/northeast-area/beltsville-md-barc/beltsville-agricultural-research-center/docs/a-vision-for-long-term-scientific-leadership-in-beltsville/

[10] "A Vision for Long-Term Scientific Leadership in Beltsville," USDA Agricultural Research Service, Beltsville Agricultural Research Center. January 31, 2025. https://www.ars.usda.gov/northeast-area/beltsville-md-barc/beltsville-agricultural-research-center/docs/a-vision-for-long-term-scientific-leadership-in-beltsville/

from Virginia to Maine. Farmers in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed will feel this loss most acutely given BARC's record of pursuing research topics specific to the watershed. According to USDA, there are around 83,000 farms in the Chesapeake Bay watershed with nearly 30% of the 64,000-square-mile watershed dedicated to farming. [11] These farms collectively produce over $10 billion annually in agricultural sales per year and grow over 50 different commodities, from staple crops like corn, wheat, and soy to specialty crops like fruits and vegetables.[12] The closure of BARC will leave this key agricultural region under-resourced.

Key BARC research projects cannot be relocated, and decades of work may be lost completely if BARC closes. BARC carries out long-term, place-based research that takes place both in field sites on BARC's grounds and in sites located in the surrounding area. Various research projects depend on these research sites remaining constant; this allows scientists to collect long-term data, observe changes and effectively isolate different variables over time by keeping the site environment constant. For example, BARC hosts the Lower Chesapeake Bay Long Term Agricultural Research Network (LCB-LTAR), which involves several major field experiments at BARC that would be impossible to physically relocate without compromising the experiments. This research has been and continues to be critical for informing agricultural conservation practices in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed and beyond.

Closing BARC and relocating key research activities will not result in lower cost of living for USDA employees. In the Senate Agriculture Committee hearing titled "Review of the USDA Reorganization Plan" on July 30, 2025, Deputy Secretary Vaden stated that: "One of [USDA's] principal considerations for where to put our regional hubs was cost of living. We want people to come to USDA for a career, to start a family, and to stay with us. And unfortunately, given the cost of living in the National Capital Region, [employees] can no longer do that in the District of Columbia." However, BARC is located in Prince George's County, Maryland – not the District of Columbia. The cost of living in Prince George's County is significantly lower than in the District of Columbia, at an estimated at $121,972 per year for a two-parent, two-child family. [13] The new hubs you propose are in counties that have costs of living that range from $124,856 in Larimer County, CO (Fort Collins) to $101,965 per year in Marion County, IN (Indianapolis).[14] The cost of living in Prince George's County clearly falls within the cost-of-living range of the

[11] "USDA Announces Initiative, Invests $22.5 Million in Water Quality Improvements in Chesapeake Bay," United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Service Agency. May 6, 2022. https://www.fsa.usda.gov/news-events/news/05-06-2022/usda-announces-initiative-invests-225-million-water-quality

[12] "USDA Announces Initiative, Invests $22.5 Million in Water Quality Improvements in Chesapeake Bay," United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Service Agency. May 6, 2022. https://www.fsa.usda.gov/news-events/news/05-06-2022/usda-announces-initiative-invests-225-million-water-quality

[13] The Economic Policy Institute's Family Budget Map calculates the cost of living for a two-parent, two-child family across all counties in the US. According to this resource, the cost-of-living is $155,745 in the District of Columbia and $121,972 per year in Prince George's County, MD (Beltsville) – a difference of $33,773.

[14] According to the Economic Policy Institute's Family Budget Map, the cost-of-living range for counties where the proposed hubs are located range from $124,856 for Larimer County, CO (Fort Collins) to $101,965 per year in Marion County, IN (Indianapolis). The cost of living in Prince George's County, MD (Beltsville) is $121,972 per year and therefore is within the cost-of-living range of new hubs proposed. For reference, the cost of living in Wake County, NC (Raleigh) is estimated at $114,321 per year, the cost of living in Salt Lake County, UT (Salt Lake City) is estimated at $109,642 per year, and the cost of living in Jackson County, MO (Kansas City) is estimated at $102,117 per year.

proposed hub locations; if cost of living for USDA employees is truly a "principal consideration" of USDA's proposed relocation plan, as Deputy Secretary Vaden claimed in the hearing, then USDA cannot credibly claim that BARC's closure has anything to do with affordability concerns on behalf of USDA employees, especially when those employees have not even been consulted on the reorganization plan.

No USDA reorganization plan should move forward without a thorough benefit-cost analysis that includes a full accounting of the potential impacts of closing BARC. In the Senate Agriculture Hearing, Deputy Secretary Vaden claimed that the proposed reorganization plan would save $4 billion. However, USDA has provided no credible information to back up this statement. Americans deserve an accurate, transparent assessment that analyzes both the costs and benefits of the proposed USDA reorganization plan before any action is taken to close BARC and the other National Capitol Region facilities. Such an assessment should be shared publicly after review by the Inspector General to ensure that it fully accounts for all major impacts of the proposed relocations and closures – including the specific impacts of closing BARC as well as any impacts to USDA's ability to fulfill its mission areas.

BARC's excellence in agricultural research is of enormous value to the nation, and so we urge you not to close this critical facility. We also urge USDA to ensure full transparency in any potential reorganization and to follow the letter of the law. We request an urgent meeting with you at your earliest convenience to discuss our concerns.

Sincerely,

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

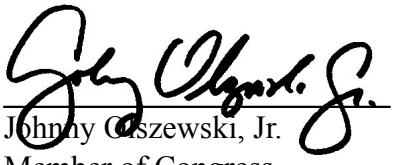
April McClain Delaney
Member of Congress

Glenn Ivey
Member of Congress

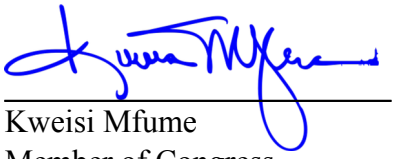
Angela D. Alsobrooks
United States Senator

Steny H. Hoyer
Member of Congress

Sarah Elfreth
Member of Congress



Johnny Olszewski, Jr.
Member of Congress



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