


'Cut, Relocate, Eviscerate': Moving a USDA Research Agency Will Have Lasting Consequences, Employees Say

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The Economic Research Service collects data on how many Americans lack access to food. When the agency moves to Kansas City, former employees say all of it could be lost. The Economic Research Service serves as data broker to the United States Department of Agriculture, providing information on food prices and farm forecasts. Some of its other contributions are less known: The agency, slated to move to Kansas City in September, also collects information that helps inform policy decisions on programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and school lunches. Although these programs serve more than 45 million people and claim the biggest share of the USDA budget, the ERS's research on food assistance has not always been politically popular, and, at times, the department has prioritized studies of production agriculture.

Former employees say the USDA's decision to move the headquarters will do more than sideline food assistance work: It will bury it. "[The relocation] decimates the program, and it will take years to rebuild," says [Laurian Unnevehr](#), a former director of the ERS food economics division, which studies food nutrition programs, food prices, and food safety.

The move has prompted more than half of the staff scheduled for relocation to quit, the department announced on Tuesday, and will spread the rest of the team thin, marooning them in the Midwest, away from the USDA and congressional staffers who used to seek their input on changes to programs or proposals. A USDA spokesperson says 72 ERS employees agreed to move to Kansas City, 76 would remain in the capital, and 99 quit, rather than relocate, although the numbers won't be official until September 30th, when the remaining employees report for work in Kansas City and the department says it will "implement an aggressive hiring strategy."

The ERS's newly formed union, under the American Federation of Government Employees, predicts that the exodus will be especially large in the food economics division, according to union representatives. "It's hard to imagine how our research in this area will not take a hit," Kevin Hunt, acting vice president for AFGE Local 3403, writes in an email. "The Food Economics Division will be cut by [60 to 70 percent], so those that remain will likely have to take on other projects. Many individuals will have to shift into management positions that are being vacated too."

According to Hunt, some researchers who study school meals, SNAP, and food security will remain in D.C., and a few who work on food security are planning to move. Other experts on food access will not be relocating, "and have to quit/be fired," Hunt writes.

Current and former employees in the food economics division worry the move will reduce resources for producing annual statistics and make what analysis is still produced easier to ignore. Without the ERS's research, they say, the Trump administration could continue to gut food assistance programs, unchecked and uninformed, with no one to assess the damage. The USDA has justified the move by claiming that it will position the agency responsible for this work closer to farmers—but that also means it's farther from policymakers, who will continue to make changes to SNAP and WIC, whether or not they're backed up by data.

"The department clearly believes that farmers are the main customers for ERS work, and that's not right," says Susan Offutt, a former ERS administrator and former chief economist of the U.S. Government Accountability Office. "It dismisses all the other people in the country who look to ERS for research that's not directly on farmers and farm welfare, and that includes food assistance."



In the world of food research, data is hard to come by. Much of it is proprietary, owned by agribusiness and retailers. The USDA, too, has historically had a dearth of data on its own programs: To determine whether its food assistance programs were working, the USDA used to rely on private consultations that were not peer-reviewed. All this changed when the ERS launched the food economics division in the '90s.

Employees spent years amassing reliable data on the food system, using resources that few else have access to. For example, the ERS tracks where food security is increasing or declining among different groups. Unlike universities and other prominent researchers, the ERS is able to collect data for the entire country, using government-mandated surveys—information that many independent researchers rely on for their own work. "What's done in the food economics division is really unique," Unnevehr says. "I don't think there's any single university that has the resources in terms of data or the interest in pursuing these questions, and there isn't anywhere else in government."

With many employees quitting, and the rest divided across Kansas City and D.C., experts say the foundation for findings like those on food insecurity would be lost. Employees who leave aren't easily replaced: It's hard to get economists to take the salary cut, Offutt says. She

adds that the whole premise of the USDA's "closer to farmers" justification is flawed: The agency routinely recruits employees from across the country to D.C. Much of the staff are agriculture economists from land-grant universities, but many are applied economists.

The ERS won't stop researching key food issues, but employees worry that, after the move, there will be few employees left to collect the data.

Rebecca Boehm, a food and environment economist with the non-profit Union of Concerned Scientists, says that, if the move affects data collection, it puts the future of assistance programs at risk. "Without that information, we're flying blind and don't know where we should be aiming policies to remedy food insecurity issues," she says.

Boehm sees the relocation as a targeted effort to suppress findings that don't align with the Trump administration's own attack on public benefit programs. Since the president took office, ERS researchers have found that food assistance programs are highly effective and have low levels of fraud, contrary to Republican lawmakers' recent claims. They've found that President Donald Trump's signature legislative achievement, the Tax Cuts and Job Act, would largely benefit the country's wealthiest farmers.

Trump proposed a 2020 budget that would slash the ERS' funds for research on food assistance and nutrition by \$16 million. It would also entirely "eliminate research and other data products on USDA food and nutrition assistance programs and on food consumption and nutrition." That's everything related to food access, including the SNAP data system, which estimates program participation on the state and county level.

"When the research is showing these programs are effective, they have low levels of fraud, they help low-income people and children—that's in direct conflict to what Trump wants to achieve politically, which is to [reduce those programs]," Boehm says. "I do see a tension there. An easy way to remove potential impediments from these findings is push out scientists, and move them away from Washington so they're out of earshot of policymakers."

ERS researchers interact with the 12 other federal statistical agencies, which collect data about health, transportation, labor, and more. "There's so much collaboration that happens in Washington," Boehm says. "Moving them out of Washington will make it much more difficult for that information to filter into the policy process. And we know if we don't have data, science, or an evidence base to generate policy, we're really just operating on politics."

Other former employees worry that, in Kansas City, the departments' sometimes-unpopular findings will be easier to ignore. "Face to face still matters," Offutt says. "You can move the ERS out of the nation's capital, but decisions are still made there."

In the agency's earlier years, the ERS was the agency the agriculture secretary and others called when they wanted advice—even if they later chose to overlook it. Offutt says that, in

her tenure, under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, policymakers in the USDA and on the hill routinely sought out the ERS for input on a policy, or to ask questions about a proposal's effectiveness. The ERS was approached for support on Michelle Obama's Let's Move! initiative, which was aimed at reducing childhood obesity. To make sure the campaign was informed by research, the staff built up tools like the food environment atlas and the food access database, which can tell you things like how many families without cars live farther than a mile away from a grocery store. Now, both are threatened by the relocation because key staff have considered quitting, according to employees within the agency.

Notably, government officials haven't always liked the answers they've received from the ERS. Often, ERS findings reveal unintended consequences of a proposal, or get in the way of policymakers doing what they want, Offutt says.

For example, Offutt was the ERS administrator when the agency changed the name of one of its major federal surveys from "hunger" to "food insecurity." The term, sanctioned by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, better aligned with the question the researchers were looking to answer: How many Americans lack access to healthy food, and what do they eat as a result? But at the time, anti-hunger and anti-poverty groups—and even the Clinton administration—weren't pleased.

"This is a good example of where the ERS doesn't necessarily make people happy when it adopts a more accurate and scientifically sound way of doing a survey," she says. "It's a bipartisan kind of phenomenon."

Under Trump, however, some employees feel this bipartisan phenomenon has grown into a full-blown attack on science. Offutt sees even farther reaching consequences: The ERS is just one federal agency whose input informs policy. The Trump administration also plans to relocate the Bureau of Land Management to Grand Junction, Colorado. The ERS could be seen as "the canary in the coal mine," Offutt says. "If the administration can do this—cut and relocate and eviscerate—with one agency, why couldn't they do it with others?"