

INTRODUCTION:

Good morning. My name is Ali Mitchell. I serve as the Executive Director for the Association of Northeast Extension Directors, NEED for short. NEED is a non-profit organization through which the Extension Directors from each of the 12 northeastern states, 16 Land Grant Universities in total, come together to share information, collaborate on priority issues, and establish a collective voice for communicating the interests of cooperative extension at a regional scale.

Extension's programs have been built from a legacy of agriculture, 4-H, and home economics. They have since evolved into contemporary programs, delivered effectively to farmers of all stripes, their families, and the communities in which they live, meeting modern needs. To continue on this path, we believe that the three legs of NIFA -- education, research, and extension -- must be equal partners that work together to address today's most pressing challenges.

In the northeast, NEED works towards this alongside our sister organization NERA, which represents the agriculture experiment station directors, to build relationships that empower transdisciplinary collaboration, information sharing, and integrated programming across the region. At the national scale, we work along side the four remaining regions to address five national strategic priority's –

1. Nutrition, health and wellness
2. 4-H Positive youth development
3. Water quality and use
4. Food production and food security
5. Community and economic development

With that background, I will respond to the three questions posed.

First, "what is the most-needed breakthrough in science/technology that would advance your agricultural enterprise?"

Breakthroughs in science and technology cannot occur without investment in research and cannot be implemented without investment in extension. As such, NEED urges NIFA to prioritize funding research that maximizes cross-disciplinary approaches, including social science, to improve system efficiency, sustainability, and resilience. We also urge NIFA to continue consulting and engaging cooperative extension throughout the priority setting, scoping, and RFP writing process. American agriculture is not the sum of large commodity enterprises; it is equally small, local, and niche farms in mid-sized and small states. It is important those growers and those communities are not structurally excluded from accessing NIFA funds by the wording of RFP's or forgotten wholesale in their development.

We hope that the same consideration is given to agricultural diversity if and when technologies or systems are developed at the federal level. Stakeholder utility, accessibility, and affordability must be ensured as tech gets transferred from the lab to the marketplace.

Now that I have set the stage for what research investment should look like, I will highlight two areas where breakthroughs are needed – intelligent farm management and market economics.

First -- In the northeast region we see need for technologies that help people farm smarter, not harder. We need farm management technologies that harness the power of interdisciplinary data to combat a

shrinking labor force and are built to fit into working lives. We hope that NIFA will provide funds to aid in developing labor-enhancing technologies such as targeted pest identification and management apps, remote monitoring systems, precision robotics for weed management or pesticide application, and quick field tests.

Second -- While not a traditional "scientific area", research is also needed to develop markets and distribution systems that elevate diversified, local, and small-scale agriculture. With economic models that show how small and large agricultural enterprises can harness negative externalities and turn them into diversified income streams, struggling farmers and resource-strapped communities can rise together. Cooperative Extension, with its system of university and field-based researchers, agents, and educators, is uniquely situated to help farmers adapt their businesses to these new models while helping communities access the resources in their own backyards. Take, for example, a mountain of rock produced when clearing Connecticut fields. If that farmer could sell those rocks for coastal infrastructure projects suddenly a local economy is building itself.

The second question is, "When considering all of agriculture, what is the greatest challenge that should be addressed through NIFA's research, education, and extension?"

Today's greatest agricultural challenges arise at the interface of urban and rural America. Nowhere are these issues more salient than in the northeast.

With a population of 60-65 million people, the northeast region holds roughly 19% of the U.S. population on 5% of its land area. As a hub of wealth and population, this region drives food production decisions. Despite this, extension sees a dynamic where farmers and agriculture continue to be misunderstood while consumers remain misinformed or frustrated by the marketplace. NEED knows that increasing agricultural literacy in consumer populations is critical for bridging the divide between urban and rural America. We know that an informed public makes for a more productive farming sector, leads to an increased appetite for smart ag, provides increased support for smart land management decisions, and leads to stronger, more vibrant communities. But the same rule applies – cooperative extension has the capacity and knowhow to deliver these programs, what we are missing is the investment and support from NIFA.

In the northeast, as in many parts of America, agricultural land can often be valued higher for non-agricultural uses. This is especially true at the urban-rural interface. Resources must be put towards supporting the economic and mental health of farmers who face this harsh reality alongside questions of crop insurance, health insurance, farm employees, succession planning, and marketing. At the same time, we should be doing our best to bring talent into the sector by highlighting the innovative opportunities in tech, biology, and natural resource management that agriculture provides. The work training and positive youth development cooperative extension provides are critical to this endeavor and should be elevated as a NIFA priority.

Finally, "what is your top priority in food and agriculture research, extension, or education, that NIFA should address?"

In the northeast region, state extension priorities run the gamut from identifying new market opportunities to nimble climate adaptation, from support for small farm business planning, to Agribility, to effective pest management.

It is NEED's stance that cooperative extension should be at the table while NIFA establishes competitive grants to address co-developed priority areas. At the same time, NIFA should empower this locally-based, national network of researchers and educators to be nimble and effective by prioritizing the capacity funding that lets dedicated individuals do their day-to-day work.

Capacity grants are the lifeblood for many northeastern states. Those dollars provide both stability and responsiveness. Since they are not tied up in pre-defined issue areas, capacity funds give extension the opportunity to leverage resources of all types to address fast moving, critical, and evolving research and extension issues as they arise.

Capacity funds allow cooperative extension to leverage state and local investments to address the traditional agriculture topics detailed earlier, as well as the nation's largest positive youth development project through 4H, the administration of national nutrition programs through SNAP-Ed and EFNEP, and efforts to challenge the country's growing epidemic of opioid abuse and misuse through PROSPER and other initiatives.

Without a healthy balance between competitive and capacity grants cooperative extension cannot hope to continue driving American agricultural ingenuity and innovation, helping to ensure food security, or developing community vitality.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with this – We are concerned that relocating NIFA away from the capitol region may have profoundly negative effects on the health of the national extension and ag-research system. The number of day-to-day interactions between NIFA and other federal agencies will likely plummet, reducing the capacity for NIFA to interact, align, and collaborate with agencies whose goals intersect their own.

At the same time, leaders at the land grant universities will be faced with the hard choice between sending representatives to interact with their federal funding partner NIFA or their elected representatives in Congress.

In summary -- Meetings are easy to schedule over the web, relationships are not; and this relationship between NIFA and the LGUs is important not just for the health of the land grant system but for the American people as a whole.

On behalf of NEED, we hope that the USDA and the many other unnamed departments with a stake in this national project take our comments and recommendations to heart as we usher in a new relationship between agricultural and urban America. We ask that you help extension be nimble through capacity funding and pointed through dedicated grants. Consider the northeast and remember the urban rural interface as you identify challenges, work towards breakthroughs, and set priorities.

Thank you for your time.