



Northeastern Regional Association of State Agricultural Experiment Station Directors

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TO: NIFA Listens Organizers
FROM: Rick Rhodes, Executive Director-NERA
RE: NERA Written Comments Submission
DATE: June 24, 2021

I serve as the Executive Director for a consortium of 14 research stations that constitute the Northeastern Regional Association of State Agricultural Experiment Station Directors (NERA.) These stations are primarily located on the campuses of the Northeast's Land-grant universities. All these stations serve as hubs in a nation-wide agricultural R&D enterprise that should be the envy of the world.

The NERA directors want to ensure that the unique characteristics of the agricultural systems of the Northeast are well-represented in NIFA's approaches and grant funding portfolio. The Northeast is home to over 67 million consumers on roughly 5% of the U.S. land. Hence, the Northeast's dense population residing in close proximity to the rural/urban continuum poses unique challenges and opportunities. ***Clearly, there is a need to promote agricultural literacy and to examine and grow urban food systems if we are to exploit the potential agronomic, economic, environmental, and cultural opportunities this proximity poses.***

Not surprisingly, there is great diversity of agriculture in the Northeast that involves both food and non-food systems. NERA encourages NIFA to make available grants that support these diverse agricultural activities, from small to large, food to the green industry. Further, funding opportunities that promote sustainable practices, from field to table, are essential in solving our food and natural resource challenges. While we respect that many of the NIFA RFA's seek an element of "scalability", scalability does not necessarily translate to application to all regions. ***Agriculture is place-based and we encourage NIFA to include broadly in RFA's, opportunities for regionally-based research.*** For instance, investment in programs like specialty crops research provides unique grant entry portals for regionally-based work.

We note that the Experiment Station Section has submitted comments to NIFA on the research, education and extension budget and agree with the investment areas identified by ESCOP. To that end, there are several items in the ESCOP recommendations that we wish to highlight. We agree that that if this nation is to have truly just and sustainable food systems, ***we must re-double our efforts dedicated to diversity, equity and inclusion.*** In addition to investing in human infrastructure, we must also invest in research buildings, current and future, and ***strongly support an agricultural research infrastructure fund of at least \$11.5 billion.*** Last, President Biden has characterized climate change as an existential threat. We agree and note that agricultural systems must develop short-term strategies to adapt to a changing global climate system that pose profoundly different challenges across the regions of our country. Agriculture has the potential, indeed the responsibility, to mitigate climate change and ***NERA strongly supports research opportunities that that are dedicated to ecosystem services, greenhouse gas emissions, development of carbon sequestration strategies and advancing carbon markets all in an effort to guide climate-smart, ag practices and sound climate policies.***

Finally, ***we urge NIFA to consider strategies for eliminating barriers to grant program applicants.*** For example, matching requirements for competitive grants and the capping of indirect costs are strong disincentives that impact institutions throughout the Northeast.