agInnovation Budget and Legislative Committee (BLC): http://escop.info/committee/blc/
Tuesday, August 26, 2025; 3 pm CT/4 pm ET/2 pm MT/1 pm PT
Call Notes – MEMBERS and LIAISONS

Committee Members:

Chair: Steve Lommel (agInnovation South) **Past Chair:** Anton Bekkerman (agInnovation NE) **Incoming Chair:** Gary Pierzynski (agInnovation NC) **Members:** Alton Thompson (ARD) Ulises Toledo (ARD) Derek McLean (agInnovation NC) Wendie Cohick (agInnovation NE) Scott Senseman (agInnovation South) Sreekala Bajwa (agInnovation West) Shawn Donkin (agInnovation West) BLC page with previous meeting notes	**Liaisons:** Lisa Townson (Extension)* Bob Mattive (CARET) Doug Steele (APLU FANR) Elizabeth Stulberg (Lewis-Burke, Advocacy) Gary Mayo (NIFA) Kevin Cain (BVM) Laura Jolly (BHHS) **Executive Vice-Chair** Jeanette Thurston (agInnovation North Central, ED) Chris Hamilton (agInnovation North Central, AD) *Bill Hoffman provides support for Lisa Townson

Attendees: Steve Lommel, Elizabeth Stulberg, Matt Peterson, Jose Toledo, Anton Bekkerman, Scott Senseman, Shawn Donkin, Gary Pierzynski, Doug Steele, Bret Hess, Bill Hoffman, Wendie Cohick, Derek McLean, Lisa Townson, Jeanette Thurston, Chris Hamilton (recorder)

Recoding Link:
https://uwmadison.zoom.us/rec/share/_w6b3kKGsMEmaPcePiLYd4J2x1ovjdq75NzF7A0Hy8BYLusRcA6ZKp9PIyOPFddS.eYYJnneR2O-Tygjk Passcode: 3XM1H*0*

Action items:

1. Chris: Send letter discussed today with Jose's suggested edit included to BLC members.
2. BLC Members: Provide comments and edits on reorganization draft letter by Friday morning; review for partnership language and trigger-word neutralization.
3. Jeanette:
   - Incorporate meeting feedback into draft reorganization comment letter
   - Finalize USDA reorganization comment letter by Friday morning deadline
   - Send completed letter by Saturday (submission extended to Sunday, 8/31/2025)

Meeting Agenda:

1. Welcome and Chair Updates (10 min) – Steve Lommel
2. ****Input to USDA Reorganization Plan (40 min)- -Everyone**** (background and request below)
3. LBA Update (10 min) - Elizabeth Stulberg
4. Other Business, as time allows

AI and Chris' Meeting Notes (AI content edited by Chris Hamilton):

USDA Reorganization Response Discussion

- USDA reorganization open comment period extended to end of month, originally due at midnight. Comment process unusual - uses email submission rather than Federal Register, raising concerns about transparency and public accessibility.
- Northeast lacks representation in proposed regional hubs - closest hubs are Raleigh and Indianapolis, both ~1,000 miles away. It would be good to have all regions and national letters including mentions of the need for the NE hub so it's clear we all support that region. Northeast has highest population density despite not being largest ag production region, requiring decision-making representation.
- Senate hearing already occurred with senators generally supportive of reorganization plan, only upset about lack of prior consultation. Matt Peterson indicated that so far, most comments have come from members of Congress. GT Thompson identified as only Republican questioning the reorganization's value and necessity.
- ARS scientists embedded in universities at risk - current regional offices may close, affecting day-to-day operations and partnerships.
- Doug Steele's suggestion for the letter: We are aware of what's happening, and we want to assist with the process and be supportive. Perhaps the BAA should come out with this comment – Doug and Elizabeth could work together on this.
- Chilling effect observed - many universities avoiding individual submissions due to fear of federal retaliation.
- agNC association has a draft letter with more positive tone, emphasizing partnerships and regional collaboration, with 7 institutions indicating they wish to sign on. None from institutions themselves, though.
- No member institutions from agInnovation West (agW) are submitting letters on their own, plus agW Executive Committee does not wish to send a letter from the regional association.
- Power in numbers approach - national letter could complement regional submissions to show broader support and we need to be consistent with all in support of NE hub needs.
- Jose Toledo: Hope that any savings from re-org come back to us; maybe add this point in the letter. Elizabeth suggests proceeding carefully about mentioning savings; administration hasn't said anything about where the savings will go.
- Suggested edit from Jose from chat: *We wholeheartedly commend the administration's commitment to reducing waste and enhancing operational efficiency. These efforts are especially commendable when the resulting savings are strategically reinvested in U.S. agriculture—bolstering research, extension services, forestry, and other essential programs. Such investments are critical to reaffirming our global leadership and ensuring that America remains at the forefront of agricultural innovation, outpacing nations that have aggressively sought to challenge our position*.

FY 2026-2027 Appropriations Planning

- BAC recommendation: maintain FY26 **request** levels (not funding levels) for FY27, representing 10-15% above actual funding.
- RFA (Research Facilities Act) success celebrated - $125 million annually secured, totaling $1.25 billion over 10 years with required matching funds. Long-term RFA strategy - $1.25 billion represents only 10%

of estimated $13-14 billion infrastructure deficit, so we hope to revisit this in a few years, although it's a good start. NIFA capacity concerns for managing RFA rollout - agency unprepared for significant budget increase from $2 billion base.

- AFRI coalition likely to maintain $500 million request - current funding at $445 million, authorized level at $700 million. Anything above $700M would be considered too high a request, despite still being lower than NIH (NIH is $46B, by comparison, but don't forget Congress is trying to cut NIH by 40%).
- Timeline established: September meeting for section requests, October for complete package review, November APLU meeting for final recommendations to take to Policy Board of Directors (PBD).
- F&A rates under threat - administration targeting cuts from current 30% statutory rate to 15%.

Call adjourned at 3:59 pm CT.

Background on USDA re-org discussion provided with call agenda:

******USDA recently opened a public comment period on their Reorganization Plan, which carries significant implications for agricultural research and our partnerships with USDA agencies/scientists. The deadline for input was **August 26**, now extended to Sunday, 8/31/2025

Last week, Jeanette reached out to Lewis-Burke Associates (LBA) for guidance on whether agInnovation's Budget and Legislative Committee (BLC), our regional associations, or other groups (e.g., LGUs, BAA, CARET) should submit a response. After consulting with APLU FANR staff, their recommendations were as follows:

- CARET delegates should not participate in a coordinated response.
- Individual LGUs are encouraged to respond directly.
- APLU and the BAA are not planning a coordinated response.
- agInnovation could submit a unified statement of priorities and concerns.

Steve Lommel agrees this is an issue the BLC should address. Accordingly, our BLC meeting will focus primarily on this topic. If we move forward, we will need to draft and submit a response to USDA that same day. If we agree to respond and to make things move quickly, Jeanette will circulate a starter draft prior to our August 26th meeting.

Please seek input from your regional colleagues ahead of the meeting to ensure our response reflects perspectives from across all regions.

LBA provided the following draft language for consideration: **NIFA**--President Trump's Big Beautiful Bill included an unprecedented investment in agriculture research - $1.25 billion over ten years is to be provided to land-grant universities for agriculture research facilities. This generational investment will spur advances in American agriculture that will keep our farmers and ranchers internationally competitive for years to come. The BBB funding will be administered by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). NIFA staff had already begun implementing this program, originally funded with $1 million in annual appropriations, and we are looking forward to the expedient roll-out of this new BBB funding. Currently, NIFA staffing levels are sufficient to run this large, complex program, but less than half of NIFA staff are currently located in NIFA's Kansas City headquarters. The success of this program and, indeed, the future of agriculture research, depends on USDA maintaining capable and experienced staff at NIFA. As the Department finalizes its relocation plans, we encourage a phased transition of staff to Kansas City, with staff who are unwilling or unable to move from the

National Capital Region (NRC) or elsewhere serving as mentors to new staff brought on locally. Those mentors, and their institutional knowledge, should remain NIFA assets at least until local staffing targets are achieved.

ARS--ARS Area Office staff not only manage, evaluate, and direct research programs in their respective regions, they are also responsible for approving and maintaining cooperative agreements and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) between the region's ARS facilities and local land-grant institutions. This is not a function the ARS Office of National Programs currently has the expertise or capacity to manage. As the Department moves to close the ARS Area Offices, we recommend Area Office staff remain geographically near the programs they oversee, even if, organizationally, they report to a different office.

BRS--USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) Biotechnology Regulatory Services (BRS) regulates the importation, interstate movement, and environmental release of certain crops, insects, and microbes developed using modern genetic techniques. Land-grant scientists depend on the expertise of BRS employees, who are needed to grant permits and to consult on potentially regulated products. This small office is currently headquartered in Riverdale, MD, though many of its staff are distributed across the country as inspectors. The National Capital Region (NCR) staff benefit from proximity to their regulatory counterparts in the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Together, these three agencies are part of the Coordinated Framework for the Regulation of Biotechnology; they meet regularly as new or potential agricultural innovations are proposed to delineate agency boundaries and to coordinate and streamline their regulatory processes. In addition to the global benefits of interagency coordination for the development and advancement of agricultural biotechnology, it is also convenient for stakeholders to meet with BRS, EPA, and FDA as they are all located together in the NCR. We respectfully request that BRS staff stay based in the NCR as a small segment of the 2,000 employees proposed to remain. This will reduce potential attrition in this small but important program, maintain close ties between BRS and its regulatory counterparts in FDA and EPA, and enable easy stakeholder access to all of these agencies at one time.

In addition, gleaned from agInnovation director discussions, broader concerns have come up, including:

- Potential loss of USDA staff expertise critical to research collaborations and activities across multiple agencies (not just NIFA but also FS, ARS, NRCS, etc.).
- Impacts on program implementation capacity (again, beyond NIFA).
- The need for adequate support for LGU facilities to accommodate both current and relocated USDA employees.

Given this context, please come prepared to discuss whether BLC should submit a response on behalf of agInnovation, and if so, the key points we should include.