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STATEMENT OF
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RESOURCES, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEPARTMENT OPERATIONS, RESEARCH, AND
FOREIGN AGRICULTURE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE

AT
OVERSIGHT HEARINGS

ON

AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

We are pleased to be here today at your request to discuss the results of some of our major reviews related to the Department of Agriculture's research and development activities. The Federal/State research and extension partnership has given our Nation new and better ways to improve food production, processing, and marketing as well as helping solve problems in environmental quality and human nutrition.

It is our understanding that these hearings are the second part of a comprehensive examination of agricultural research and extension which began with oversight hearings on the Cooperative Extension Service in the 97th Congress. We testified at those oversight hearings in February 1982 on our report, "Cooperative Extension Service's Mission and Federal Role Need Congressional Clarification" (CED-81-119, Aug. 21, 1981).



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We have also issued reports dealing with specific research programs including germplasm and nutrition. Our report entitled "The Department of Agriculture Can Minimize the Risk of Potential Crop Failures" (CED-81-75, Apr. 10, 1981) assessed the overall management of the germplasm system, while our report entitled "Better Collection and Maintenance Procedures Needed To Help Protect Agriculture's Germplasm Resources" (CED-82-7, Dec. 4, 1981) addressed specific operational problems associated with the Department's germplasm program. In our report entitled "Progress Made in Federal Human Nutrition Research Planning and Coordination: Some Improvements Needed" (CED-82-56, May 21, 1982) we reported on the need to continue to work toward coordinated nutrition research planning.

Because today's hearings are geared to providing an overview of the agricultural research programs supported by the Department of Agriculture and are to deal with subjects such as planning, coordination, and roles of research participants, our testimony will primarily highlight the work we have done in looking at fairly broad agricultural research issues. We will discuss our studies dealing with (1) long-range planning for agricultural research and development, (2) agricultural economics research and analysis activities, and (3) use of Federal agricultural research facilities.

LONG-RANGE PLANNING FOR
AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

Our report entitled "Long-Range Planning Can Improve the Efficiency of Agricultural Research and Development"

(CED-81-141, July 21, 1981) addressed the need to improve long-range planning for agricultural research. We reported that the U.S. agricultural research and development system does not perform national long-range planning for agricultural research which would satisfy generally accepted definitions of such planning. Essentially such planning entails establishing long-range goals, selecting strategies for achieving those goals, setting priorities, and preparing a series of short-range plans to accomplish the goals. The key research participants--the Department of Agriculture, the land-grant colleges, and State agricultural experiment stations--do engage in some aspects of national long-range planning but only to a limited extent. Current planning efforts primarily involve short-term or operational planning.

National long-range planning is extremely difficult for agricultural research with management and planning scattered among Federal, State, local, and private authorities. The difficulties are compounded by uncertainties and conflicts that require compromises on equally desirable goals.

We concluded that it was unlikely that national long-range planning efforts for agricultural research and development can be immediately undertaken, given the inhibiting factors facing the system. We said that a better approach would be for the Department and State research organizations to cooperate in developing a first step in long-range planning--making a food needs assessment and determining the research alternatives that would help meet those needs.

In March 1981 we provided this subcommittee with proposed legislation to direct the Department of Agriculture to make such a food needs assessment in conjunction with State land-grant colleges and experiment stations. Such legislation was incorporated into Sections 1402 and 1405 of the National Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching Policy Act of 1977 by Public Law 97-98 which was approved on December 22, 1981.

The Department agreed that long-range planning is one way to maintain and improve agricultural research and development. The Joint Council on Food and Agricultural Sciences is now conducting a food and agriculture needs assessment for the Department.

We also reported on the need for the Department to develop a long-range plan for all in-house agricultural research. We pointed out that although the Department has attempted to set goals for in-house research, has done long-range planning for individual in-house research topics, and has developed operational plans for in-house research, for the most part, these efforts were not integrated into a unified long-range planning guide for the Department's in-house agricultural research.

We recommended that the Secretary of Agriculture develop an agencywide long-range plan for agricultural research and development. Subsequently, the Department undertook development of a long-range plan for in-house agricultural research. In February 1983 the Department issued its "Agricultural Research Service Program Plan" which consists of both a strategic plan outlining six broad long-range program goals and objectives and

a 6-year implementation plan for the period 1984-1990. This program plan is to guide the Department's operational planning, resource allocation, and program execution.

AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS
RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Our report entitled "Agricultural Economics Research and Analysis Needs Mission Clarification" (GAO/RCED-83-89, Jan. 31, 1983) pointed out that agricultural economics research and analysis have become increasingly important in providing the basic data with which to monitor the food and fiber system's performance, on which to base farm policy, and for targeting and evaluating farm programs. We reported that little has been done to plan for, prioritize, and coordinate agricultural economics research and analysis; and that within the agricultural community there is disagreement on the roles of the system's major participants--the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service and the State land grant institutions' departments of agricultural economics.

The emphasis of the Service's work has changed from farm management studies to broad agricultural issues, and its mission is not clear. During the past few years the Service has performed socioeconomic research, which is questionable from a subject matter perspective, while other priority research and analysis needs have not been given adequate attention. For example, research on regional crime trends has been conducted while research on potential for agricultural exports has not been adequately covered.

Lack of clear mission and definition of the roles for carrying out that mission is a barrier to improving the linkages and communication between the Service and the land-grant institutions. A clarification of mission and roles should make it easier to plan for and prioritize research needs as well as identify areas of mutual interest and facilitate productive cooperative research.

We recommended that the Secretary of Agriculture, in cooperation with the State land-grant institutions, examine and clarify the Federal role in agricultural economics research and analysis, including clarifying the mission of the Service and its role in relation to that of the land-grant institutions, and prepare a mission statement and submit it to the appropriate congressional committees for their information and review. We also recommended that the Secretary provide leadership in planning and coordinating agricultural economics research and analysis by directing the Administrator of the Economic Research Service to actively encourage joint program planning for and coordination of agricultural economics research and analysis with the land-grant institutions as well as other interested Federal and State agencies.

The Department agreed with the need to work with the land-grant institutions to clarify the Economic Research Service's role. As part of its effort to provide coordination and planning, the Service recently established a new position, Deputy Administrator for Planning and Organizational Relations. The

Service has begun developing a long-term plan that will guide its program for the rest of the decade and will involve the land-grant institutions in this planning process. Further, the Service is also preparing a new statement of mission which will eventually be released as a public document.

USE OF FEDERALLY SUPPORTED
AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH FACILITIES

Our report entitled "Federal Agricultural Research Facilities are Underused" (GAO/RCED-83-20, Jan. 14, 1983) concluded that many of the Department's Agricultural Research Service's (ARS') 148 domestic research locations were not staffed to their designed capacity--a condition which makes individual research projects more expensive.

According to the most current national figures available at the time of our review, ARS had research space for about 3,275 scientists. At that time ARS had 2,403 of its own scientists using the space, or about 73 percent of the rated capacity. An additional 317 non-ARS scientists, or about 10 percent of the rated capacity, were also using the space. The percentage of use at individual facilities varied from over 100 percent of designed capacity to as low as 17 percent of capacity. The overall underuse has resulted primarily from a declining personnel ceiling as well as construction of new facilities.

New laboratories are still being planned, which could further reduce the overall rate of use because ARS' personnel ceiling is not expected to rise in the foreseeable future.

In the existing environment of projected Federal budget cuts and growing deficits, closing research facilities and, where appropriate, consolidating their functions with others may be the most viable alternative available for reducing underused capacity.

ARS does not have a comprehensive plan to reduce the number of ARS-owned research locations. Any plan to close laboratories will need to be well coordinated and justified to those parties having an impact on the decision process. In developing a plan, factors such as scientist interaction, efficient use of scientific equipment, need to do site-specific research, age of scientists, and research priorities need to be considered in determining which facilities to close.

Our report recommended that the Secretary of Agriculture develop a plan to consolidate agricultural research activities at fewer locations, thereby allowing greater scientist interaction and more efficient use of equipment, facilities, and administrative resources. We added that the plan also needs to address research priorities, personal and career plans of ARS employees, the costs of relocating employees, and the potential sales values or other uses of unneeded laboratories. We also recommended that the Secretary submit the plan to the appropriate committees of the Congress for their review and comments.

We also suggested that given the currently underused research facilities, the unlikely prospects for increasing ARS' personnel ceiling, and the congressional mandate to conduct a

long-range food needs assessment and determine the research necessary to meet those needs, the Congress should consider not authorizing or providing funds for additional research facilities until the Service has completed its planning process and the Congress has had an opportunity to study those plans. In the future as the Congress deliberates the need for any additional research facilities, the plans, if periodically updated, should be helpful in determining whether available ARS facilities are adequate, or could be modified or expanded at a reasonable cost, to carry out the needed research.

The Department replied that ARS was developing a strategic plan to use as a basis for future research management. It added that the implementation and operational plans that support the strategic plan should be an excellent basis for the Secretary of Agriculture to assure consolidation of research and permit greater scientist interaction for more efficient use of equipment, facilities, and administrative resources.

This concludes my statement. My colleagues and I would be happy to respond to any questions you might have.