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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

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June 25, 2019

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

I write today to express my concern regarding the recent report that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is downplaying the significance of climate change research that scientists at the Department have conducted. A recent Politico report, titled "Agriculture Department buries studies showing dangers of climate change," chronicles a litany of troubling instances where USDA leadership sought to bury or otherwise moderate the public release of several studies containing significant findings related to climate change's effects on agriculture. USDA research, whether focused on climate change or any other topic, benefits farmers, ranchers, and families in rural America.

It would be deeply irresponsible for the Department to suppress research that helps USDA customers and the agricultural economy as a whole.

Among the most troubling of the details reported in the article was USDA's failure to publicize a groundbreaking study regarding the nutrition content of rice grown in a CO₂-rich environment. According to Politico, not only did the USDA decide not to publish its already prepared press release on the matter, but the Department apparently also went to great lengths to suppress any publicity from their research collaborators, the University of Washington in this case. The USDA's rationale for this apparent suppression was that senior USDA officials were "adamant that there was not enough data to be able to say what the paper is saying, and that others may question the science," despite the fact that the paper had been peer-reviewed and had also undergone the standard policy and technical review at the Department's Agricultural Research Service (ARS).

The claims in the Politico article are highly concerning given the significant effects that climate change is having on our farmers and agricultural economy. As you know, the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry recently conducted a bipartisan hearing entitled, "Climate Change and the Agriculture Sector," where we heard about the profound impacts that farmers and ranchers can expect from unchecked climate change. It would be irresponsible and inexcusable to withhold important research information from America's agricultural producers in light of this challenge.

Consequently, I would appreciate a thorough explanation regarding the circumstances surrounding the decision not to publicize the rice research and the other types of studies mentioned in the Politico article so I can share that explanation with my colleagues on the U.S Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry. Furthermore, I urge the USDA to issue a public press release and prominently post on its website all agency research relating to climate change that has been completed since January 20, 2017.

Moving forward, I urge you to publicize any future studies involving climate change research in accordance with standard practice prior to 2017. Burying important and relevant research findings hurts farmers, plain and simple. I hope you agree and that we can work together to ensure instances like those outlined in recent reports do not continue into the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Debbie Stabenow". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Debbie Stabenow
Ranking Member