

Agriculture Department Launches Research Enterprise

New National Institute of Food and Agriculture focuses on transforming its grant mechanism.

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Courtesy USDA/Sam Hurd

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced at the launch of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture that the new grants mechanism will encourage inter-agency cooperation. There's a new kid on the block in the United States Department of Agriculture. Last week, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced the launch of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, which will serve as the USDA's extramural research enterprise.

Created by Congress, it will replace the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service and will focus on modifying mostly internal operations, paying particular attention to the scale and scope of its grants system.

Grants distributed by NIFA will focus on five main areas: plant and animal production (especially in regards to sustainability), food and nutrition, youth and community development, international programs, and climate change and bio energy.

"We will be rebuilding our competitive grants program from the ground up to generate real results for the American people," Vilsack said at the launch on Oct. 8, 2009, in Washington.

NIFA directors took a look at what they considered great grant-making processes throughout the country when devising the new grant mechanism, the feature that most distinguishes the enterprise from its predecessor, said Rick Borchelt, communications director for research, education and economics at USDA.

"Larger grants given over longer periods of time are very important," he said.

Although small farmers might not notice the results from such changes in the short term, he said that the results from the research made possible by NIFA grants will be evident over time regarding market, climate and more.

"The whole purpose of NIFA is to identify big challenges as opposed to focusing on small problems," Borchelt said.

Vilsack outlined several big outcomes during the launch that he'd like to see from NIFA and USDA science in general. They include the development of stress-resistant crops, improved nutrition and end of childhood obesity, improved food safety, secure energy, and making Americans better stewards of the environment and natural resources.

"The opportunity to truly transform a field of science happens, at best, once a generation," Vilsack said. "Right now, I am convinced, is USDA's opportunity to work with the Congress, the other science agencies, and with our partners in industry, academia and the nonprofit sector to bring about transformative change."

Current research being done in the department identifies sectors of the agricultural economy vulnerable to climate stress. For example, there are some areas of the country where water flow is erratic and where there are severe disruptions in temperature, which affects plant and animal production. There are also areas of research where information is lacking, such as with abiotic stress factors – the negative impact of non-living factors on living organisms. The new grant structure will better allow the USDA to leverage its resources to support both the leading research as well as areas that need more work, by teaming up with other federal agencies, Borchelt said. This cooperation toward a common goal was not encouraged by CSREES.

Small farmers probably will not notice many changes in their daily lives as a result of NIFA's launch. Programs such as cooperative extension services, which operate in the same realm as NIFA, receive only partial federal funding, Borchelt said, and any evident changes will be seen on the local and state levels. However, NIFA aims to get extension services on the same page with its outlined goals.