OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20250

June 5, 2026

THE HONORABLE CHRIS VAN HOLLEN
United States Senate
730 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Van Hollen:

This letter is in response to the letter co-signed by the Maryland Congressional delegation concerning USDA's recent announcement regarding the decommissioning of the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC).

As we have noted on numerous occasions, the BARC facility is inadequate to support USDA's long-term research mission. Decades of insufficient funding by Congress and deferred maintenance have severely degraded the condition of the campus. BARC currently carries over $300 million in deferred maintenance liabilities and would require a one-time investment exceeding $500 million, in addition to more than $40 million annually, to fully modernize and sustain the campus. Despite longstanding concerns regarding the condition of BARC, Congress appropriated only approximately $129.5 million for infrastructure improvements over the last ten years, including approximately $36 million in Fiscal Year 2026 appropriations. That amount represents a small fraction of the estimated costs to fully modernize and sustain BARC's campus. At current funding levels, full modernization would take decades to complete while employees continue working in deteriorating facilities with known infrastructure and safety deficiencies. This lack of funding has occurred despite Maryland lawmakers' serving as senior congressional appropriators.

These concerns are not theoretical. Following a 2023 whistleblower complaint, the United States Office of Special Counsel substantiated multiple infrastructure and safety failures at BARC, including mold, water damage, HVAC failures, and non-functioning fire suppression systems.[1] USDA has worked diligently to address critical issues within available appropriations and

[1] https://www.osc.gov/~assets/cases/di-23-000706-708-719-referral_redacted.pdf

resources; however, continued operation of the facility under these conditions is neither operationally responsible nor financially sustainable. USDA offered members of the Maryland delegation an opportunity to tour BARC's campus and review these conditions firsthand. To ensure that the Maryland delegation understands the seriousness of the situation, I have enclosed (1) the Office of Special Counsel's report on BARC's condition, (2) the Biden USDA's response to the Office of Special Counsel's inquiry, (3) multiple complaint letters submitted by the American Federation of Government Employees about BARC's unsafe condition, and (4) a small sampling of photographs taken on my own tour of the facillities demonstrating BARC's sad state. You will note that, in his March 29, 2024 letter to the Office of Special Counsel, then-Agriculture Secretary Thomas Vilsack agreed that BARC is "an unsafe and deteriorating workplace environment for employees."

The Department has complied with all applicable laws concerning the relocation of these employees. We are cognizant of the statutory restrictions concerning the disposition of the real property that constitutes BARC, and USDA is not disposing of any real property at BARC. Accordingly, USDA is in compliance with the statutory provision cited in your letter, Pub. L. No. 100-202, § 523, 101 Stat. 1329, 1329-417 (1987).

Similarly, with respect to *Continuing Appropriations, Agriculture, Legislative Branch, Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, and Extensions Act, 2026*, Pub. L. No. 119-37 (2025), USDA is acting within its legal authority. In *Immigration and Naturalization Service v. Chadha*, 462 U.S. 919 (1983), the Supreme Court held that one-house legislative vetoes are invalid because, as an exercise of legislative power, they are subject to the bicameralism and presentment requirements found in Article I of the Constitution. That same rationale applies to the similar provisions relating to approvals by Congressional committees. Consistent with longstanding Executive Branch policy and Supreme Court precedent, these purported approval requirements have been treated as Congressional notification requirements.

Finally, the assertion that USDA is abandoning agricultural research or undermining its scientific mission is categorically false. BARC research projects receiving Congressional funding will continue across USDA's more than ninety Agricultural Research Service (ARS) locations across the country, which are better suited to support long-term mission needs and priorities. Notably, Congress eliminated funding for nine BARC research projects and cut funding for eight more projects in the Fiscal Year 2026 appropriations process.

BARC research will be relocated to facilities located closer to the agricultural regions, commodities, producers, and stakeholders they serve. Rather than continuing to concentrate taxpayer-funded research activities in severely outdated facilities with significant infrastructure and safety deficiencies, the Department is focused on ensuring research is conducted in locations capable of delivering results for American farmers, ranchers, foresters, and consumers for decades to come.

Thank you, again, for your letter. If you have additional questions, please have a member of your staff contact the Department's Office of Congressional Relations at (202) 720-7095 or ocr@usda.gov. A copy of this letter was sent to your colleagues.

Sincerely,

Stephen Alexander Vaden

Stephen Alexander Vaden
Deputy Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Enclosures