



Updated May 7, 2026

Farm Bill Primer: Agricultural Research and Extension

The farm bill is a multiyear, omnibus law that governs a wide range of federal agricultural and food policy programs. Since 1977, each farm bill has included a title that authorizes and amends agricultural research, extension, and education programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). This title supports research, extension, and education activities at land-grant institutions (LGIs) and other eligible nonfederal partners, as well as intramural USDA research programs and departmental policy initiatives.

The most recent farm bill, the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 farm bill; P.L. 115-334), reauthorized and amended these programs through FY2023. Since its expiration, Congress has enacted three one-year extensions through FY2026 (P.L. 118-22, Division B, §102; P.L. 118-158, Division D, §4101; and P.L. 119-37, Division B, §5002). Additional legislation in the 119th Congress, including budget reconciliation (P.L. 119-21) and Agriculture appropriations for FY2026 (P.L. 119-37, Division B), has further affected research funding and authorities.

The 119th Congress has begun work on a 2026 farm bill that would reauthorize research programs through September 30, 2031. The Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2026 (H.R. 7567, as passed by the House on April 30, 2026) would extend and modify USDA research programs, including changes to funding structures and program priorities. The President's FY2027 budget request also proposes adjustments to research funding, including reductions in capacity (formula) funding and a greater emphasis on competitive research programs. USDA research activities continue to be funded primarily through discretionary appropriations.

Background

The research title of the farm bill addresses extramural and intramural research, extension, and education activities. *Extramural* programs provide federal support—through capacity (formula) funding and competitive grants—to nonfederal researchers and educators at LGIs and other eligible institutions. *Intramural* programs fund research conducted by federal scientists at USDA facilities. *Agricultural extension* provides nonformal education to the nonuniversity public.

Four agencies within USDA's Research, Education, and Economics (REE) mission area administer these activities. The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) manages extramural funding programs. The Agricultural Research Service (ARS) conducts intramural scientific agricultural research. The Economic Research Service (ERS) conducts economic and social science research. The

National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) collects and disseminates data, including through the *Census of Agriculture*.

Extramural Research, Extension, and Education Programs

NIFA administers funding through capacity and competitive grants. Capacity funding is allocated by statutory formulas, allowing institutions to set priorities across research, extension, and education; many programs require matching funds. Competitive grants are awarded through peer review and support targeted or integrated projects. Capacity programs are authorized under statutes such as the Hatch Act (1862 LGIs) and Evans-Allen Act (1890 LGIs), and endowment-based funding for 1994 LGIs.

These programs are funded through annual appropriations and are permanently authorized. Competitive programs, including the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), are also funded through annual appropriations. AFRI is USDA's flagship competitive grants program, open to a broad range of applicants and authorized at \$700 million annually, though appropriated funding has typically been below the authorized level.

The 2018 farm bill expanded competitive programs, including the Scholarships for 1890 Institutions Program, the New Beginning for Tribal Students Program (NBTS), Centers of Excellence, and the Federally Recognized Tribes Extension Program.

Intramural Research Programs and USDA Policies

The research title also addresses USDA-wide policies and intramural activities. The 2018 farm bill expanded USDA research priorities to include international collaboration and reauthorized the Research, Education, and Economics (REE) Advisory Board. It also established the Agriculture Advanced Research and Development Authority (AGARDA) (7 U.S.C. §1632b–1632c) to support high-risk, high-reward research. AGARDA is authorized to be appropriated up to \$50 million annually and has received an average of \$0.8 million per year in annual appropriations between FY2019 and FY2026.

Funding

USDA research, extension, and education activities are funded primarily through discretionary appropriations, with limited mandatory funding from the farm bill. The four REE agencies combined (ARS, NIFA, ERS, and NASS) received approximately \$3.8 billion in FY2026. NIFA administers several programs with mandatory funding, including the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (\$175 million annually), the Organic Agriculture Research and

Extension Initiative (\$50 million annually), and the Research Facilities Act Program (\$125 million annually).

Selected Provisions in the House-Passed H.R. 7567

H.R. 7567 includes a range of amendments and reauthorizations affecting USDA research, education, and extension programs, including:

- Increase funding for 1890 institutions, including higher minimum funding levels and state matching requirements (§§7110–7112, 7114);
- Expand authorities for 1994 institutions, including land, infrastructure, and equipment acquisition and repair (§§7115, 7501, 7510);
- Add new high-priority research areas (e.g., specialty crop mechanization, soil health, per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), invasive species) (§§7204, 7305);
- Modify Centers of Excellence, including expanded eligibility and geographic distribution (§7208);
- Expand workforce, community college, and veteran-focused programs (§§7123, 7210, 7306);
- Reauthorize and expand veterinary workforce programs (§§7103–7104);
- Increase funding for research infrastructure and equipment (§§7119, 7502); and
- Expand funding for urban, indoor, and emerging agriculture research and extension (§7207).

The bill also includes provisions on innovation and coordination, including expansion of AGARDA (§7125), and the creation of an Agricultural Innovation Corps (§7609). Additional provisions address farm stress assistance (§7402), NASS modernization (§7606), organic transition research (§§7213, 7205), and agricultural land transfer studies (§7610).

Considerations for Congress

Capacity Versus Competitive Funding

Congress faces several policy considerations as it evaluates current and future research title provisions, including capacity and competitive funding. Historically, funding has been relatively evenly split between NIFA's extramural programs and ARS's intramural research.

Supporters of intramural research argue that ARS is well positioned to address long-term, national priorities due to its stable funding base, while others contend that competitive funding mechanisms promote innovation and broader participation. The FY2027 budget proposal would reduce capacity funding and expand competitive grants, and H.R. 7567 includes related provisions, such as expanding the list of competitive grants for high-priority research and

extension initiatives (§7204). These proposals could shift the balance between capacity and competitive funding if enacted.

Congress may choose to adopt, modify, or reject these proposed changes, or maintain the current funding structure.

LGI Funding Equity

Another policy issue is funding equity among LGIs. Differences in matching fund requirements, along with variation in states' ability to meet them, may contribute to disparities between 1890 and 1862 LGIs. The 2018 farm bill added transparency requirements for reporting state matching fund waivers for 1890 institutions (7 U.S.C. §2207d). USDA may approve waivers or reductions in nonfederal matching requirements when states are unable to meet the full match, though implementation varies. Despite these requirements, reported differences in state contributions and overall funding levels between 1862 and 1890 LGIs persist, sustaining congressional interest. H.R. 7567 includes provisions to increase support for 1890 LGIs and modify matching and reporting requirements (§§7110–7112, 7114).

Funding for 1994 LGIs is also a related issue, as they do not receive dedicated capacity funding and instead rely on endowment income and competitive grants. Proposed provisions would expand authorities (§§7501, 7510) and support tribal student programs (§7115).

Congress may consider whether to modify funding structures or maintain the current framework.

Agricultural Research Infrastructure

Agricultural research infrastructure remains an ongoing policy consideration for Congress. Many NIFA grant programs restrict the use of funds for construction and facility maintenance, which limits the extent to which competitive grants can address infrastructure needs. Stakeholders have periodically raised concerns regarding aging research facilities. H.R. 7567 would expand support for research facilities and equipment (§§7112, 7119, 7502), along with related provisions on research coordination and workforce development (§§7123, 7306). Within ARS, facility modernization, consolidation, and, in some cases, decommissioning or relocation of research functions to regional hubs are ongoing across multiple locations in the research portfolio, including major campuses such as the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC) facility in Beltsville, Maryland.

Congress may consider whether existing funding mechanisms adequately support the construction, maintenance, and modernization of agricultural research facilities, or whether to expand dedicated infrastructure funding or modify allowable uses within current programs.

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IF12023

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