

Testimony to: NIFA Listens: Investing in Science to Transforms Lives

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Greenbelt, Maryland

Good Morning and thank you for the opportunity to participate in this session of NIFA Listens. I am Ed Jones, Associate Dean in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech and Director of Virginia Cooperative Extension. Virginia Cooperative Extension is strong and established partnership of Virginia Tech and Virginia State University.

I have spent my entire 30-plus-year professional career in Extension, starting as an Extension Wildlife Specialist at Mississippi State University, then to North Carolina State University and now at Virginia Tech. It has been my privilege to serve in a number of Extension leadership roles regionally and nationally, as examples I served as the founding chair of the National 4-H Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Program, president of the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals as well as chair of the Extension Disaster Education Network. I currently serve on the Executive Committee of ECOP, the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, which is the representative body of the Cooperative Extension Section of APLU and as co-chair of the ECOP 4-H Leadership Committee. The ECOP 4-H Leadership Committee, created in 2014, provides policy guidance for 4-H nationally and is a partnership of the Extension system, NIFA, and National 4-H Council. Today I am speaking on behalf of ECOP.

As I approach addressing the questions posed. I would first like to say that ECOP in seeking to develop strategic directions for the coming years has gone through an inclusive process to determine the programmatic priorities for the system. These priorities are Nutrition, Health and Wellness; Positive Youth Development; Water Quality and Quantity; Food Production and Food Security; and Community Development.

In response to the first question:

“What is your top priority in food and agricultural research, extension or education that NIFA should address?”

An overarching priority is that of a balanced portfolio of capacity and competitive funding provided by our federal partner. This is an important issue for Extension and research. Extension and research at Virginia Tech work in close partnership and we often say that it is impossible to say where one ends and the other begins. In that integrated context capacity funding provides the ongoing infrastructure to support programs and initiatives and competitive funding provides opportunities to focus for a limited time on a specific question or issue.

Capacity funding is the foundation upon which Extension can be responsive, flexible and innovative. I encourage my colleagues in Virginia Cooperative Extension to take risks and try new approaches, methods, or program topics, knowing full well that some will not be productive, but others may produce profound and unexpected results. Being accountable in a program or project sense could stifle such creativity

and limit innovation that is desperately needed. Other examples of the importance of capacity funds can be seen in disaster response and recovery and in positive youth development. In the South hurricanes are an all too often occurrence.

Extension faculty and staff at all levels must have the ability to immediately change their programs and activities to address the pressing needs of their communities and clientele. Immediate action is of course critical, but just as important is the long-term recovery process, Extension is still in the community long after other state and federal agencies and nongovernment organizations have moved on. I have seen this importance first-hand. While in North Carolina I directed the 6-month-long animal mortality disposal program following Hurricane Floyd in 1999 and the state-funded disaster assistance enrollment program for housing and agriculture assistance following subsequent hurricanes. The presence and commitment of Extension in those impacted communities can often be the key to a faster and more successful recovery.

Capacity funding is also critical in supporting positive youth development. Positive youth development is a long-term proposition. The ECOP 4-H Leadership Committee has adopted the goal of growing 4-H from 6 million youth enrolled to 10 million by 2025. To do so will require creative and new ways of reaching youth who have not had access in the past; in a manner that is attractive and inviting to youth of various cultures and backgrounds; and provides the opportunities for growth that are not available by other means. This growth in participation is critical to providing the productive, responsible, and civically engaged individuals needed to

lead us into the future. The future of agriculture and our communities depend on a productive workforce be they scientists, producers, entrepreneurs or educators. To achieve these ends, stability in youth programming is critical, and that stability is ensured through capacity funds. Adequate capacity funding is critical for the success and stability of all land grant institutions to meet the extension and research needs of the future.

In response to the second question:

“What are the most promising science opportunities for advancement of food and agricultural sciences?”

I offer two topics of importance and opportunity. The first is big data. As the issues we address in Extension become increasingly complex, it requires new approaches on how to focus and be impactful and relevant. The science behind data development, management, analysis and interpretation are critical to making quality decisions to be sure we are meeting the most pressing needs of our communities. As an example, the Social and Decision Analytics Lab in the Virginia Tech Biocomplexity Institute and Virginia Cooperative Extension are in partnership with Iowa State University in the development of Community Learning Data Driven Discovery. This process commences with a Data Discovery Workshop by asking local leaders what questions they have but cannot currently answer. The process continues with identifying data sources that can provide insights; wrangling the data (profiling, cleaning, transforming, linking); using statistical and geospatial learning along with the communities' collective knowledge to inform policy

decisions; and then developing, deploying, and evaluating intervention strategies based on scientifically based principles. The expectation is that Extension and other agencies and organizations can focus in on the most pressing needs and develop solutions. This project has led to a larger conversation of the Regional Rural Development Centers and Extension faculty on the use of data in new and innovative ways not previously conceivable.

For the second topic I want to return to positive youth development and 4-H. In order to meet the challenge of growing leaders for the future, significant investment and attention are needed to understand youth development in the digital age, and to evaluate and develop methodologies for attracting and retaining youth from various cultures into positive youth development programs. The development of evaluation and impact assessment tools are important to continual improvement of positive youth development approaches. There are significant research and extension opportunities that should resources be available that would result in more impactful approaches to growing future leaders.

Again, I want to thank you for the opportunity to participate and speak on behalf of ECOP. We look forward to our continued, productive partnership between the cooperative extension system and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture.