

*This material is part of a collection that documents the harassment, discrimination, and retaliation perpetrated against Alaska's women research scientists by their supervisor, with full knowledge (and arguably, "tacit approval") of their federal employer, the USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS)*

# Budget cuts hit Alaska farms and gardens

**RESEARCH: Loss of about \$6 million may cost 20 jobs at UAF, Palmer, Kodiak.**

By KYLE HOPKINS  
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Dennis Fielding raises grasshoppers. Sometimes by the hundreds. Sometimes by the thousands.

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By experimenting on the pests at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, the federal researcher is seeking ways to prevent outbreaks that can decimate the crops, such as barley, that fuel Alaska's agricultural food chain.

But by the end of the year, the scientist and his grasshoppers could be gone -- his job erased under cuts proposed to the Agricultural Research Service in President Obama's 2012 spending plan.

The budget, introduced in mid-February, calls for closing the U.S. Department of Agriculture research service laboratory and research unit in Alaska.

That means plucking nearly \$6 million in spending on agriculture from the state, and could result in the loss of roughly 20 jobs in Fairbanks, Palmer and Kodiak, said entomologist Alberto Pantoja.

If funding is not somehow preserved, he said, "we will disappear as an agency in Alaska."

Pantoja worked as the service's lead researcher in Alaska, but left the job Friday to work for the United Nations in Chile, he said.

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The proposed closures are part of \$42 million in nationwide reductions to the Agricultural Research Service under the new spending plan.

Advocates of the agricultural research unit in Alaska say the jobs here are important to:

- Prevent insect outbreaks.
- Promote disease-resistance in potatoes and other crops.
- Catalogue and preserve different varieties of high-value sub-arctic plants such as peonies and rhubarb.

Sen. Mark Begich on Friday sent a letter to Edward Knipling, administrator for the Agriculture Research Service, calling for the department to preserve the efforts in Alaska.

At any given time, Begich argued, a shipping disruption could lead to Alaska food shortages within three to five days. While Alaska will never be able to produce all of its own food, research

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conducted by federal scientists helps it get better at producing and sustaining crops.

"Based on our subarctic climate and unique growing conditions, I would argue Alaska is the state most in need of an (Agricultural Research Service) program," Begich wrote. "However, the current proposed budget cuts would make Alaska the only state not to benefit from an ARS research laboratory."

A spokeswoman for the Agricultural Research Service in Washington, D.C., could not be reached Friday afternoon.

Fielding, the Fairbanks bug expert, said researchers are hopeful that the funding will be restored by the Senate before Congress passes the final 2012 spending plan.

Begich spokeswoman Julie Hasquet said it's unclear whether that will happen.

"As you know, with the federal deficit where it's at, there is an enormous need and pressure to cut across the board," she wrote in response to a question. "So everyone will have to do more with less."

Obama's \$3.7 trillion spending plan for the next fiscal year, starting Oct. 1, is expected to reduce the deficit by \$1.1 trillion over the next decade and includes \$33 billion in domestic cuts, according to reports.

In Alaska, federal agricultural researchers partner with the University of Alaska Fairbanks, funding student jobs and sharing building space and equipment.

"It's quite a blow to UAF and the UA system," said Carol Lewis, dean of the School of Natural Resources and Agricultural Science and director of the Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station. "We would lose about \$2 million in projects."

Lewis, who opposes the cuts, said the federal researchers in Kodiak work to reduce the amount of fish waste that ends up in oceans and rivers by converting it to bio-fuel, using it as compost and potentially as fertilizer.

The projected loss of sub-arctic agriculture research also has some Alaska farmers and gardeners concerned.

One problem, said Rita Jo Shultz of Homer, is that the research unit maintains a kind of depository of Alaska plant varieties at the UAF experimental farm in Palmer.

Think of the project as a nature preserve for unique flowers, seeds and crops that farmers may need to bolster business or researchers may want for future study.

Shultz and others are looking for a place to move and preserve peony varieties, maybe in Oregon, so the research isn't lost.

Peonies are a growing cash crop in Alaska, Shultz said. They bloom here July through September -- a time when the flowers are not available elsewhere.

Shultz has sold her crop for \$4 a stem.

"That's why people are getting involved ... For a small amount of property you can have a financial investment that makes sense," she said.

The research conducted by the Alaska subarctic research unit could create more resilient flowers and better soil for growing, said Shultz, who is president of the Kenai Peninsula Peony Growers.

"Right now we're being encouraged by several Japanese buyers to sell to them this year," she said.

Shultz just doesn't have enough flowers to meet the demand.

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JusticeSleeps

It's true, Alaska may lose some federal dollars if the ARS leaves, but isn't it worse to keep funding agencies that don't support equal rights for women?! Go ask the ARS employees what happened to all their women research scientists in Alaska. Then take a look at the agency's national statistics to see just how poor the ARS's record is for hiring, promoting, and retaining women scientists. I'd rather see my tax dollars going to support research within an organization that isn't so flagrant in flaunting U.S. anti-discrimination laws, especially up here "in the wilds", where the agency acts as though we're just too dumb to notice.

0 minutes ago

Edit Reply



capgattis

There must be at least 10 government employees working for the Federal and State in agriculture for every one farmer that is actually producing a crop. If you want a boom in agriculture in the State of Alaska then fire most of these beauracats and send the 100k salaries and benefits directly to the farms. If not that, then just remove all the cumbersome regulations and let the farmers sink or swim. Save money in either case.

8 minutes ago 1 Like

Like Reply



skyrader

Too bad most in here want to pass along the rhetoric and not actually help save something that will be detrimental to the State should this funding be lost. It is about food security here as well people. What if the shipping was interrupted? where would you buy the fruit you eat?

1 hour ago 1 Like

Like Reply



unregistered360360

what is the percent of fruit bought in Alaska actually grown in Alaska presently??

1 hour ago in reply to skyrader

Like Reply



skyrader

less than 1 percent

1 hour ago in reply to unregistered360360

Like Reply



BigFish56


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when did the greatest and richest country the world has ever known turn into a misery scrooge? Both parties have destroyed the trust of Americans until the government we're stuck with appeals to very few. I blame the pencil pushers and lawyers. Democracy or corptocracy, we're at that point where we need to put our collective foot down and get our priorities in order. Honest debate seems far in the past right now. ?????

1 hour ago 2 Likes

Like Reply



**enots**

Instead of seeing this as detrimental to Alaska, why not take this opportunity for the STATE to step in, not the federal government, and help fund/implement a state agricultural department. There is money in the reserve accounts. Why not put it to good use and promote our farmers and gardeners with state money instead of relying on the cash cow (the Fed) that is soon to dry up anyway. The state needs to become more self-reliant, so why not start here?

2 hours ago 2 Likes

Like Reply



**skyrader**

Perhaps if others would contact the Govenor and their Legislators the State could step in. I have contacted all of them within the State and no response. It takes many to get something changed. Please contact them if you haven't.

1 hour ago in reply to enots 1 Like

Like Reply



**BigFish56**

Gee, why isn't so-called free enterprise taking up the research initiative and it's costs? Isn't free enterprise the Holy Grail of conservatives, able to leap into the financial abyss and tend to our every needs? Looks like corporate America only wants to privatize the money making parts of gov, not the costly research funding. Why am i not surprised? The fact is that for decades the US government has led the way in research that has brought about most new technologies and innovations, mostly via cooperative arrangements with major universities and technical institutes using grants, many involving the military. At some point in time, the government hands off the technology or whatever it might be to corporate America to be commercialized. Many too-big-to-fail and semi-monopolistic corporations got their start or big boosts from government-funded research spin-offs. We've allowed these good 'ole boys to suck at the trough for decades. Now, they want to pay even less taxes, which leads to less valuable research grants. I've heard much anecdotal evidence that many engineers and scientists are moving to Europe, where they're not harassed by The American Taliban, aka christian conservatives. Think stem cell research. Audit every Federal Dept for savings. Simplify the regulation codes so normal humans can understand them to save money. There's many areas to make government smaller and more efficient and people-friendly. How about farm subsidies for NOT growing crops? Huh? There's easily 100 billion that could be slashed from the military. Shut down many of the 163 overseas military bases. Why is the obscenely bloated military some kind of sacred cow? We aren't the world's police. Politics is playing havoc with budget cuts. The cut's are there. Better look again.

2 hours ago 2 Likes

Like Reply



**unregistered360360**

Obama wants to cut a program and you blame it on the conservatives... have you stopped being a hypocrite... much

1 hour ago in reply to BigFish56

Like Reply



**skyrader**

You miss the point here. Research for Agriculture isn't handled by 'big business' never will be. As for free enterprise there is a group here within the State that has been researching on their own for years! You should also be aware that whether it is 'big business' or free enterprise, it takes the Federal Government (ARS) to help as many

business of free enterprise, it takes the Federal Government (AKS) to help as many new food crops can't just cross the border without being virus indexed to prevent the spread of disease!

1 hour ago in reply to BigFish56 1 Like

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