

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.

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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.

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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Oarlock

Sadly, this is the tip of the iceberg...NRCS, Rural Development, all the USDA and federal jobs will be effected. Even the Tsunami Warning Center...Palmer may loose 30-40 well paying jobs. The cost to the local economy will be devastating. We need leadership in Washington to turn around these puppets of the corporations and the wealthy.

8 hours ago

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AKPSmith

UAF experimental farm needs to re-focus to also provide additional paid service to Alaskan farmers. Universities in lower 48 figured this out years ago, one even runs a fully functioning tree nursery providing hard to find species seedling stock at a profit.

The Alaskan plant (seed) depository might need to become a non-profit operation, with donations, shareholders, and beneficiaries. If those Peonies are grown and sold at \$4. per stem, then receiving any taxpayer money is egregious.

12 hours ago

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AK1958

Every day someone is bit(hing about government spending or "Alaska doesn't need Federal funds"! Reality check - Bull!!!!!!!!!!!!!! this state is in a hurt and the people have no control over the state government. Alaska is a dying state.

14 hours ago

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AKPSmith

Good point, as Alaska Boom-Bust cycle just continues, the state private sector bleeds jobs, investment capital, and vision. The struggle between stagnationists yelling no-no-no at any development proposal, and corporate interests demanding huge greedy profits or they'll shun the state, is real. In the end BOTH will lose.

Currently in Juneau and DC politicians are running around doing 10% of everything (hype) and 100% of nothing (goals). And so it continues...

11 hours ago in reply to AK1958

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Akraisia

It is irrational to cut this funding.

1 day ago 1 Like

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



cheaptp

I LUV BUGS :) (Mr.? Dr.?) Fielding, if u are reading this, THANK YOU and the other researchers for your help to preserve our food supplies. & please keep this situation in your prayers and remember it when you vote, and if needed, "bug" our local, state, and USA

leaders. U Can Fight City Hall.

1 day ago 2 Likes

Like Reply



skyrader

Do Hope you contacted all of them.

5 hours ago in reply to cheaptpt

Like Reply



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.

1 day ago

Edit Reply



skyrader

What are you talking about? The head of the ARS for Alaska is a woman. Dr. Hummer. the plant pathologist in Palmer is a woman. Dr. Robertson. The Plant genetisist for Palmer is a woman! Where are you gting your info?

5 hours ago in reply to JusticeSleeps 1 Like

Like Reply



JusticeSleeps

Actually, as it said in the article, Alberto Pantoja worked as the service's lead researcher for the Subarctic Agricultural Research Unit (SARU). Dr. Hummer (working from Oregon) unexpectedly "inherited" the ARS Germplasm program in Palmer, when legitimate reasons arose for shielding Dr. Robertson from SARU-based supervision. SARU's other women research scientists were in Fairbanks, and were not similarly protected. They quit (after years of having their harassmtent and discrimination complaints discounted by the agency). It's a sorry tale, which can be verified by speaking with the scientists who remain, (if they're willing to expose the agency for what it did).

0 minutes ago in reply to skyrader

Edit Reply



Akraisia

Same for the US Military.

1 day ago in reply to JusticeSleeps

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