July 11, 2012

The Honorable Frank Lucas  The Honorable Collin Peterson
Chairman  Ranking Member
House Committee on Agriculture  House Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building  1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC  20515  Washington, DC  20515

Dear Chairman Lucas and Ranking Member Peterson:

As you move to finalize the House version of the 2012 Farm Bill, I am writing on behalf of the Association of American Universities (AAU) in support of the USDA’s premiere competitive research program, the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), and in opposition to language in the draft bill that threatens this core component of the USDA’s research mission. AAU represents 59 U.S. public and private research institutions, which perform nearly 60 percent of federally-funded, university-based research.

Established in the 2008 Farm Bill and authorized at $700 million, AFRI supports basic and applied research in the agricultural sciences and provides training funds to recruit and retain the next generation of agricultural innovators. As a competitive grants program, AFRI supports the highest quality science to address some of our nation’s most pressing challenges: demands for cutting-edge biofuels; the need for a safe, sustainable, and nutritious food supply; global food security; and the understanding of global climate change. AFRI is the only competitive federal research program that addresses the unique needs of rural communities, including ways to revitalize rural economies. More than 50 percent of the AFRI budget supports fundamental or basic research, providing the scientific understanding that underpins advances in agricultural and other life sciences.

Unfortunately, we believe that a provision in the draft bill, Section 7513, seriously threatens this critical program. This provision, which requires extensive reporting of upcoming requests for proposals by the agency as well as excessive detail on current projects, encourages undermining of the competitive, merit-based review process and detracts from the scientific expertise of the agency. We are concerned that the reported information could be used to inject political or parochial pressures into the determination of areas of emphasis, thus reducing the capacity of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture to support the most promising research and thereby impairing the quality of our national agricultural research program.

As you continue to move the Farm Bill forward, we respectfully request that you remove this language and continue support of the competitive research funded by AFRI.

Sincerely,

Hunter R. Rawlings III
AAU President