

March 2, 2011

Dear Senator Harkin:

It is with great dismay that we learned the President's proposed FY12 budget intends to completely eliminate the NIOSH Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (AFF) research program. As members of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) Expert Panel appointed to evaluate this essential effort and suggest how the program could be strengthened, we were shocked to discover that only a small, selective portion of our assessment of the program was cited as the basis for this zero-budget proposal. Upon carefully reading the budget justification narrative, it became clear to us that the authors appear to have misunderstood our panel's findings and misconstrued our conclusions.

We are writing to ask your support to restore funding for the NIOSH Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (AFF) program in the Senate's FY12 Federal budget. Of overriding importance is that the AFF industry sector is the most dangerous of all fifteen major sectors of the U.S. economy, with an occupational fatality rate far greater than for any other sector. The 2009 Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries finds AFF workers are eight times more likely to die as a result of a work related injury than all U.S. industries combined: twice as great as in mining or transportation, two-and-one half times greater than in construction, and twelve times greater than in manufacturing.

It is remarkable that Federal statutes intended to protect workers remain deficient with respect to agricultural workers. For example, these workers were initially excluded from all protections under the Fair Labor Standards Act, most agricultural worksites are exempt from workplace safety standards of the Occupational Safety and Health Act, and agricultural workers are excluded from the Federally protected right to form organizations for concerted action under the National Labor Relations Act. Even today, Federal agencies are absolutely prohibited from collecting information about non-fatal workplace injuries and illnesses on the vast majority of agricultural worksites.

The NIOSH AFF program is the most significant Federal initiative today to seek to secure a safe workplace for agricultural workers. Our evaluation panel found that the program conducts high priority, sound research with successful transfer activities when given the opportunity (pp. 160-161, 167 of our report). For example, with very modest resources, the NIOSH Commercial Fishing Safety Research & Design Program developed the award winning E-stop for hydraulic machinery, equipment that previously caused severe injuries and fatalities on fishing vessels. This innovation now saves lives.

Had NIOSH adequately documented programmatic impact, it would have learned, as our panel did on its own, that a clear record of positive impact existed that would likely improve worker health and safety (pp.129-156). The AFF program spans numerous entities outside of NIOSH, but the agency itself had significant responsibility for a "lack of leadership, stakeholder buy-in, and effective dissemination of knowledge and practices" (pp. 168-174). Many of these problems have now been corrected.

Our panel developed substantive recommendations for program improvement that were transmitted directly to NIOSH within the body of our report (pp.175-210): NIOSH could improve the program by establishing clear strategic program goals and implementing focused health status surveillance. Nonetheless, our committee concluded ... "The AFF Program plays a positive and crucial role in providing information and tools

to promote a safer and healthier work environment in agriculture, forestry, and fishing” (p. 210). We are saddened to learn that the President appears unaware of significant improvement in AFF program leadership, stakeholder buy-in, and overall performance since our assessment of 2007.

Further, we are dismayed that the very rationale for termination of the AFF program is based on a reading of our findings that ignores the many positive accomplishments of the program that we amply described. It also appears to us that terminating the AFF program could have a disproportionate adverse impact on the rural communities in which these at-risk populations work and reside. As a scientific body representing farmers, fishers, foresters, hired workers, equipment manufacturers, physicians and researchers, we are further dismayed by the budget narrative’s ignorance of the unique capacity of NIOSH, ranging from occupational medicine to epidemiology and public health surveillance. Neither the Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety & Health Administration nor the Department of Agriculture possess the scientific skills presently available in NIOSH.

Our nation’s food consumers and users of renewable products expect more from their government and elected officials than programmatic ignorance and distortion of facts. We would be pleased to meet with you and/or your staff to explore mutual efforts to restore funding for the NIOSH Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing research program.

Signed as individuals by eleven members of the National Research Council/National Institute of Medicine Expert Committee to review the Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing Research Program of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Affiliations listed for identification purposes only. The views expressed in this letter are not an official statement by the National Academy of Sciences or of the institutions with which the individual committee members are affiliated.

Sincerely,

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