

SBARE Testimony – Dec 11 2025

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Driving statewide impact by ensuring the sustainability of REC operations

Good afternoon, Chairman Gulleson and members of SBARE. My name is Marlen Eve. In August, I was hired as the NDAES Assistant Director for Field Operations. **My ask of SBARE and the ND State Legislature is that they prioritize funding that will drive the sustained impact and reach of the network of state Research Extension Centers (REC's).**

Specifically, I will propose that shoring up eroding operating funding across the network is the most impactful way to achieve this. I want to begin by acknowledging and thanking SBARE and the legislators for their continued support of the REC's, including many significant investments in infrastructure and capital improvements that have positioned the centers well to deliver impact for the state, but also for the 2025 increase in base operating dollars. The 2025 operating increase has been distributed evenly across the network of stations, giving each an additional \$40K per biennium, and every station has communicated how impactful that boost has been! It is greatly appreciated. Allow me to make the case for further capitalizing on the momentum created by that recent investment.

My charge is to oversee the network of REC's, helping improve their relevance, impact, reach, and operational efficiencies. What I have learned in my four months in North Dakota is that our agricultural and agribusiness ecosystem is incredibly diverse! I have seen how producers rely on REC research, data, and local understanding of that diverse and highly productive farmscape. While I may be new to ND agriculture, the state legislature definitely is not. Their foresight in establishing, over a century ago, a network of research centers to support the economic engine that agriculture is for this state was exemplary of vision and wisdom. Today's REC's reflect the diversity of the ND agricultural landscape. Their stakeholders include producers, communities, industry, commodity groups and entrepreneurs. They lead collaborations with state and federal partners, industry, local growers and national organizations, many of which have significant reach beyond the state of North Dakota and give our state a national reputation. The REC's have a vital and vibrant partnership with NDSU Extension, providing data, information, presentations, and expertise to the Extension teams statewide, as well as housing many Extension personnel in REC facilities. The REC's are central to the state's Foundation Seedstock program, with 4 of the REC's growing Foundation seeds for as many as 75 varieties of about 20 different crops every year. Together with NDSU, the Agronomy Seed Farm and others, they are helping return NDSU to a place of prominence in releasing new varieties that are well adapted to the North Dakota production environments.

I began my NDAES role by getting on-site at every one of the REC's and the Agronomy Seed Farm to see firsthand what they are working on, how they are having an impact, and to assess how I can help catalyze greater impact and improved efficiency. I experienced flax harvest, onion harvest, moving and working cattle, sheep lambing, seed sorting, and even processing of native seeds in support of the new Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library. The TRPL is relying on partnership with the REC's to develop their native plantings for the rooftop and grounds to be showcased next summer at the ribbon cutting. I saw firsthand how the rapidly rising cost of utilities, inputs and other operational expenses over the last 5+ years have impacted each of the REC's. I have had many difficult conversations with our REC Directors on sacrifices that will have to be made if we don't find a way to ensure adequate operating funds are available, nearly all of those sacrifices have a direct and

negative impact on the ability of the REC to be nimble to local needs, impactful for local growers, and responsive to NDSU Extension and others.

Allow me to share a few examples of how current operational funding shortfalls are negatively affecting the reach and impact of research.

1. An REC shared with me that they currently have vacant positions that they have delayed filling because of concerns over operating funds. Our current budget management protocols do not permit the use of salary funds from vacancies to cover operating expenses. However, as the power of our operating dollars erodes due to rapidly rising operating expenses, the Director is compelled to consider whether abolishing scientific or support positions is necessary to ensure the Center remains financially viable.
2. Several REC's have shared with me how, in these years since the COVID pandemic, their sales of seed, forage or livestock have been relied upon to offset shortfalls in the operating budget. That is a great short-term strategy, but not a long-term solution! When yields are high and commodity prices are strong, this can provide much needed infusions to operating accounts. But these conditions don't adhere to the biennial rhythm of the appropriated budgets and in a year when those sales don't materialize, the operating shortfalls will suddenly become a crisis! Those same sales revenues are routinely relied upon to offset urgent facility repairs, time-sensitive equipment replacement, and needed capital improvement investments, adding to the stress on the Director to make quick budget decisions that pit the ongoing research against paying the bills related to operating the station.
3. One of the REC's conducts research in six different areas of study that are all critically important to the growers and processors in their region of the state. Three of those areas of study were established by the legislature as funded priorities throughout the station's history. The other three have emerged over the decades due to evolving needs, input from local stakeholders, and the dynamics of the ND agricultural ecosystem. Operating dollars are so tight that the bulk of the funds have been focused on those specific areas of research that are named in the Century Code. The remaining areas of research, which are highly visible, impactful and locally critical, are forced to find grant dollars and contracted work to fund their operations (and most grants have budget categories that preclude their use for many operating expenses). I have observed that this scenario has contributed to increased workload and burnout of staff, excessive staff turnover, and equipment that is not able to adequately operate the projects and collect data to the highest standards that we expect from our Centers.

These are not fictitious examples! I have spent hours at the REC's visiting with staff, asking questions and examining their operations. Every one of our center Directors is a scientist at heart. They all know the value and impact that good research and data can have for our producers, their industry partners, and the communities that need the economic boost and food security. It is unacceptable that the quality or impact of the Center's research should diminish, and yet we seem fine with asking the Directors to do the impossible by maintaining that impact long-term on an operating budget that has received one \$20K/year increase since before the Covid pandemic! **Let's correct this during the upcoming biennium by right-sizing and modernizing our station operating budgets!**

Thank you for your attention, and feel free to reach out with any questions or concerns.