

September 30, 2025

The Honorable Brooke L. Rollins  
Secretary  
United States Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20250

**Re: Plan to Vacate Beltsville Agricultural Research Center**

Dear Secretary Rollins,

On behalf of the U.S. blueberry industry, we write to respectfully share our concerns regarding the Department's plan to vacate the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC) as outlined in Secretary Memorandum SM 1078-015.

The undersigned organizations collectively represent the United States' \$4.7 billion blueberry industry, comprised of dedicated farmers and stakeholders who contribute to American agriculture's success.

Blueberries are one of only a few cultivated commodities that originated in the United States – a point of pride for our industry. In fact, BARC is the birthplace of the cultivated blueberry industry and remains integral to USDA's blueberry breeding program today, driving the development of improved cultivars that keep U.S. growers competitive.

The U.S. blueberry industry is at a crossroads, facing increased competition from high-quality imports grown in climates that support varieties that cannot be grown domestically. For U.S. growers to compete on a global stage, continued innovation in breeding is essential. Selective plant breeding for traits such as extended harvest season, fruit size, flavor, and shelf life, adaptation to machine harvesting, and greater disease resilience are the foundation of U.S. growers' ability to remain competitive in domestic and international markets.

Current research at BARC underpins blueberry breeding programs nationwide and globally by providing genetic insights, germplasm resources, and nutrition science that strengthen grower practices and consumer demand. Closing BARC would fundamentally dismantle a robust system of data collection, sophisticated technology, and laboratory resources built over decades that support both public and private breeders – and ultimately the growers who rely on their work for real-world solutions to remain competitive.

BARC is part of USDA's National Clonal Germplasm Repository for Vaccinium, which preserves the genetic diversity of blueberries and related species. While the living repository is in Corvallis, Oregon, BARC scientists provide the genetic characterization that makes this material usable for breeders. BARC serves as a vital link between the Corvallis repository and breeding programs in New Jersey, Michigan, North Carolina, Mississippi, and elsewhere by providing

data and evaluations that help breeders identify the most promising traits, such as heat tolerance, drought resistance, pest resistance, and improved fruit quality. Without BARC, the USDA Vaccinium germplasm repository would be a static collection rather than a dynamic tool driving industry innovation.

Furthermore, because of its location in Maryland, BARC is a hub for Northern Highbush variety development, and supports research that addresses region-specific challenges for blueberries in New Jersey, Michigan, and Indiana.

For example, the blueberry industry frequently funds targeted research projects carried out by USDA research scientists at BARC and nearby Land Grant universities. One such project, funded by growers in New Jersey, is investigating the sudden production decline of a prominent variety - research that depends on access to BARC's blueberry germplasm repository. In addition, researchers at Rutgers and other universities rely on BARC's specialized lab space and advanced technologies, which are not readily available at other research institutions.

Vacating BARC will undermine USDA's leadership in blueberry research at a time when the industry needs greater – not reduced – investment in innovation.

For the many reasons stated above, we respectfully urge you to keep BARC open.

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to American agriculture. We stand ready to work with you to ensure U.S. blueberry growers remain competitive and to advance USDA's mission of supporting farmers and promoting the health of our nation.

Sincerely,

North American Blueberry Council  
California Blueberry Commission  
California Blueberry Association  
Michigan Blueberry Advisory Committee  
Michigan Blueberry Commission  
New Jersey Blueberry Industry Advisory Council  
New Jersey Blueberry Growers Association  
New Jersey Blueberry Cranberry Research Council  
Northwest Berry Foundation  
Northwest Center for Small Fruits Research  
Oregon Blueberry Commission  
Washington Blueberry Commission