

Economic Research Service

Strategic Plan

FY 2021 -2025



Economic Research Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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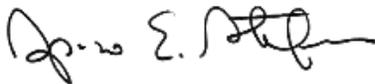
Message from the Administrator

The Economic Research Service (ERS) anticipates trends and emerging issues related to food, agriculture, natural resources, and rural areas in the U.S., and provides social science research, analysis, and data that inform public program and policy decisions in those arenas. Our purpose is to provide policymakers, regulators, program managers, and policy stakeholders with objective, unbiased, timely, relevant, and high-quality economic research, analysis, and data to broadly enhance the understanding of economic issues affecting food and agriculture. Our research and management practices are designed to ensure that our research program meets the current and anticipated needs of ERS stakeholders and customers, that research and analysis produced by the Agency adhere to high disciplinary standards and are peer reviewed, and that our research products are easily accessible by customers. ERS research, data, and other information disseminated by the Agency are available through the ERS website, and in a variety of forms and formats such as research reports, journal articles, and presentations outside ERS. For all products, the overriding goal is high-quality, objective economic analysis communicated in a useful, timely, and informative manner.

Strategic planning at ERS ensures the relevance and efficiency of Agency research and analysis. ERS involves stakeholders in discussions regarding assessment of past research accomplishments and Agency impact, as well as in identifying key policy areas on the horizon and in establishing research program priorities.

This strategic plan reflects the priorities of the Department as described in the USDA Strategic Plan for FY2018-2022, the goals of the USDA Science Blueprint, and recommendations of an ERS strategic planning exercise (2019). Central to the plan is the effective management of the Agency's resources to ensure timely, relevant, and high-quality economic research and analysis on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural development.

ERS is deeply committed to the goals and strategies outlined in this strategic plan. This plan is a working document that will continue to evolve in response to changes in the food and agriculture sector. Changes will reflect activities that ensure the continued relevance of ERS research and analysis, as well as the continued distribution of useful and appropriate products to customers. ERS looks forward to ongoing input from its customers and stakeholders to keep the Agency's research focus sharp and to ensure anticipation of the future needs of agricultural, food, resource, and rural economic program and policy decisionmakers.



Spiro Stefanou, PhD
Administrator

Mission Statement

Our mission is to anticipate economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural development, and conduct economic research that broadly and specifically informs public program and policy decisions.

Vision Statement

ERS is:

- A dynamic organization providing and supporting credible, high quality, objective, and relevant economic and social science research and analysis.
- Recognized as a premier organization that brings cutting edge research, highly valued economic and social science research, and analytical information to the table to address the needs of a rapidly evolving food and agriculture system.
- Recognized as having information that is easily accessible, understandable, and transparent.
- Home to employees who are strengthened by the diversity of their cultures and backgrounds, enjoy their important and challenging careers, and share an unsurpassed level of dedication and competence in service to the United States.

Core Values

Throughout its 60-year history, ERS has made noteworthy contributions to agricultural, environmental, and rural development policy in the United States. ERS research has helped policymakers and others make difficult decisions that change the lives of U.S. residents and people around the globe. To continue achieving ERS's goals, this plan emphasizes the *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency* identified by the Committee on National Statistics¹. As a federal statistical Agency covered by the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) Statistical Policy Directives, ERS is responsible for ensuring the quality, objectivity, and transparency of the statistical information it provides. Our policies and procedures for publishing research and data are designed to ensure that we provide high quality and objective analysis.

- A Federal statistical agency must provide objective information that is **relevant to issues of public policy**. Objective information is as accurate and comprehensible as possible and is not intended to promote a particular policy position or group interest.

¹ National Research Council. *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency: Fourth Edition*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2009.

- A Federal statistical agency must have **credibility with those who use its data and information**. Few data users are able to verify the completeness and accuracy of statistical information; they must rely on an agency's reputation as a credible source of accurate and useful statistics.
- A Federal statistical agency must have the **trust of those whose information it obtains**. Data providers, such as respondents to surveys and custodians of administrative records, must be able to rely on the word of a statistical agency that the information they provide about themselves or others will be used only for statistical purposes. An agency earns the trust of its data providers by appropriately protecting the confidentiality of responses and by respecting their privacy.
- A Federal statistical agency must have a **strong position of independence within the government**. To be credible and unhindered in its mission, a statistical agency must be distinct from those parts of a department that carry out law enforcement and policy-making activities. It must be able to execute its mission without being subject to pressures to advance a political agenda. It must be impartial and avoid even the appearance that its data collection, analysis, and reporting processes might be manipulated for political purposes or that individually identifiable data might be turned over for administrative, regulatory, or law enforcement purposes.

Impact and Performance Measurement

ERS continuously evaluates the impacts of its work. As part of that process, ERS routinely provides customers and stakeholders with opportunities for feedback, conducts rigorous and appropriate peer reviews before analysis is released, and uses a wide variety of proven and innovative dissemination systems. These activities are designed to identify how ERS research contributes to the discussion of issues in a sector, how effective Agency information is communicated to customers, and how the efficiency of the program can be improved.

No single performance measure captures the full breadth and scope of ERS's impact. Instead, several measures must be used to create a broader picture of Agency impact and performance. The key challenge for providing an overall assessment of research program performance is to develop a set of measures that, taken together, can provide a comprehensive view of program performance. These measures must be tracked consistently over time and across the Agency to be useful guides for outreach, relevance, and impact. ERS measures the use of its products by policy makers, academics, and the broader public in a number of ways, including:

- Briefings to policy makers
- Short turnaround analysis provided to USDA officials and other policymakers for use in decision making
- Information and citations in government decision-making documents
- Use of ERS publications and data
- Citations of ERS research by the news media

- Academic journal publications and citations that highlight research results and provide professional recognition for our researchers
- Scores from program reviews that measure the efficiency and efficacy of the Agency's work
- American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) customer satisfaction rating of the ERS website
- Number of website page views

In the past, not all ERS products were branded as ERS products, such as briefings and staff analysis. Going forward, ERS will ensure all research analyses and products are recognized as coming from ERS to demonstrate the overall effectiveness of its economic research program.

ERS Strategic Goals Align with USDA Strategic Goals

For nearly a century, ERS and its predecessor agencies have supported USDA programs with economic data, research, and analysis needed for sound decision making. ERS continues to inform and enhance public and private decision making on economic and policy issues related to agriculture and rural development, which have been central concerns of USDA economic research activity since the early 1900s. ERS's mission today has broadened to reflect the changing environment of our food, nutrition and health, and the agriculture system.

U.S. agriculture is environmentally sound, economically viable, and consumer focused, and its success is due to the United States' open-arms approach to innovation. Agricultural productivity growth and efficiency combined with sustainability and environmental improvements continue to be a major focus of attention. The drivers of productivity growth require new technology developments across all facets of the agricultural enterprise. These new developments rely heavily on information technology in crop and livestock genetics and precision agricultural technologies, among other innovations. While these developments contribute to productivity growth, they must also support important improvements to reduce the environmental footprint of U.S. agriculture, tie farm production more closely to consumer preferences, and lead to important changes in how farming is organized.

These changing technologies mean that the focus of research on the farm sector has expanded concern with environmental, consumer, and trade issues as they relate to farm performance. Unbiased data and research that provide the bigger picture—the larger economic context within which business decisions are made—are crucial to today's food and agricultural sector. Decision-makers across the \$1 trillion food industry are informed by ERS research, data, and statistics that now also include research on food safety and nutrition, natural resources, conservation, and the environment, and their impact on and consequences for agricultural production and trade.

To that end, ERS provides objective research, data and statistics that support evidence-based decision making by both USDA leadership as well as leaders in the agricultural and food sector. ERS's Strategic Goals, as outlined below, align with the seven USDA Strategic Goals for FY2018-2022:

1. Ensure USDA Programs Are Delivered Efficiently, Effectively, with Integrity, and a Focus on Customer Service
2. Maximize the Ability of U.S. Agricultural Producers to Prosper by Feeding and Clothing the World
3. Promote U.S. Agricultural Products and Exports
4. Facilitate Rural Prosperity and Economic Development
5. Strengthen the Stewardship of Private Lands Through Technology and Research
6. Ensure Productive and Sustainable Use of Our National Forest System Lands
7. Provide All U.S. Residents Access to a Safe, Nutritious, and Secure Food Supply

ERS Strategic Goal 1: Provide Information to Enhance Competitiveness for U.S. Farms, Agriculture, and Rural Communities

ERS research and analytical activities within this strategic goal are designed to inform policymakers, regulators, program managers, and organizations that shape public debate of economic issues affecting the well-being of rural households, businesses, and communities. The issues include factors related to farm finances and investments in rural people, businesses, and communities. The activities are also designed to enhance understanding of economic issues related to the performance of all sizes of U.S. farms.

ERS identifies key economic issues related to rural economic development, farm viability, rural household wealth and well-being, and competitiveness. ERS uses sound analytical techniques to understand the immediate and broader economic and social consequences of how alternative policies and programs and changing market conditions affect rural and farm economies and households.

OBJECTIVE 1.1 – ENHANCE RURAL PROSPERITY

ERS research explores how investments in rural people, business, and communities affect the capacity of rural economies to prosper in the new and changing global marketplace. The Agency analyzes how demographic trends, employment opportunities and job training, Federal policies, and public investment in infrastructure and technology enhance economic opportunity and quality of life for rural U.S. residents. Equally important is ERS's commitment to help enhance the quality of life for the Nation's small farmers who increasingly depend on these rural economies for employment and economic support.

Strategies and Means

- Analyzing how public and private investment and Federal farm, tax, and regional development policies affect rural U.S. residents capacity to prosper.
- Monitoring changing economic and demographic trends in rural U.S. areas, particularly the implications of these changes for the employment, education, income, and housing patterns of low-income rural populations.
- Developing a comprehensive, integrated base of information on rural economic and social conditions and assessing options for measuring the well-being of rural households and children that can be used by Federal policymakers for strategic planning, policy development, and program assessment.

OBJECTIVE 1.2 – CREATE THRIVING COMMUNITIES

ERS uses the most up-to-date information on conditions and trends affecting rural areas and provides the factual base for rural development program initiatives. The rural development process is complex and sensitive to a wide range of factors. ERS assesses general approaches to development to determine when, where, and under what circumstances rural development strategies are likely to be most successful.

Strategies and Means

- Conducting research to identify social and economic issues facing rural communities as they adjust to broad forces affecting their futures, such as changing agricultural, food, and rural development policy; domestic and international competitive pressures that affect rural business development and labor

demand; and changing rural demographics wrought by interregional migration and falling rates of natural population increase.

- Examining the rural employment and income impacts of emerging economic and policy developments such as new and expanding energy sources and needs, local food systems, and bioenergy investments.
- Conducting research to better understand the role and effectiveness of investments in transportation and communications infrastructure, including broadband; in housing, health care, education, and other social programs that support productive rural communities; and in business innovation and expansion for generating community and regional wealth.

OBJECTIVE 1.3 – SUPPORT A SUSTAINABLE AND COMPETITIVE AGRICULTURAL SYSTEM

ERS research and analysis provides insight into commodity market and financial conditions facing U.S. agriculture, avenues for innovation, market expansion, and use of natural resources. In addition, ERS identifies and analyzes market structure and technological developments that affect efficiency and profitability. This work also includes research and analysis to help farmers and ranchers manage risk.

Strategies and Means

- Providing timely and accurate agricultural economic analysis and data on the outlook for food and agricultural commodities to help the agricultural sector, including farmers and ranchers, make more informed production and marketing decisions.
- Examining the critical factors affecting price levels, volatility, and price discovery in cash and futures markets with commodity futures market research.
- Researching and disseminating economic intelligence about the structure of, performance in, information systems of, new technology in, and foreign direct investment in the U.S. food manufacturing, processing, wholesale, retail, and food service industries.
- Continuing the annual Agricultural Resource Management Survey to analyze farm business finances, production practices and costs, use of natural resources, and farm household economic well-being.

ERS Strategic Goal 2: Provide Information to Protect and Enhance the Nation's Natural Resource Base and the Environment

ERS research and analytical activities inform policymakers, regulators, program managers, and those shaping public debate of economic issues related to developing Federal farm, natural resource, and rural policies and programs. ERS addresses the challenges of a changing climate and increased weather variability and the need to protect and maintain the environment while improving agricultural competitiveness and economic growth.

ERS identifies key economic issues related to interactions among natural resources, environmental quality, and the agriculture production system. ERS uses analytical techniques to understand the immediate and broader economic and social consequences of alternative policies and programs to protect and enhance environmental quality associated with agriculture. ERS research analyzes the economic effects and cost effectiveness of resource, conservation, environmental, and commodity programs and their linkages. Topics include USDA's conservation programs and environmental policies addressing water and air quality associated with agricultural production.

OBJECTIVE 2.1 – RESTORE AND CONSERVE THE NATION'S FORESTS, FARMS, RANCHES, AND GRASSLANDS

A healthy agricultural and rural environment is one in which individuals and organizations, and other interested stakeholders, have defined and are working toward an acceptable balance of economic growth, environmental protection, and social activities. Resource concerns vary widely depending on underlying conditions (e.g., climate, soils, topography, and water availability), land use and land use change decisions by land managers, and social priorities.

Strategies and Means

- ERS research examines the environmental effectiveness, economic efficiency, and distributional implications of design options for conservation and environmental programs, including markets for ecosystem services. Design features examined include defining baseline levels of performance necessary to receive payments or participate in markets, options for targeting specific producer types (e.g., socially disadvantaged farmers), regions, or environmental attributes, and setting procedures for selecting participants from among program applicants.
- Identifying patterns and trends in land use and assessing policy drivers for land management and land use change. Farm and environmental policies, including farm programs, energy policies, conservation programs, and climate policies, may encourage farmers to modify cropping patterns, to change their crop management practices, to expand cropland and/or to retire cropland. ERS research examines whether and to what extent changes in land management and land use would occur under alternative policy specifications, and what the associated market and environmental implications may be.

OBJECTIVE 2.2 – LEAD EFFORTS TO MITIGATE AND ADAPT TO INCREASED WEATHER VARIABILITY

ERS research develops models and other analytical techniques to predict responses of farmers to greenhouse gas mitigation options and evaluates opportunities and costs of adapting to a changing climate. This research program builds on extensive expertise on the economics of land use and land management,

technology adoption, conservation program design, economics of biofuels, and value and dissemination of public investment in research and development.

Strategies and Means

- Assessing the economic, trade, and environmental implications of climate and energy policies. Analysis will focus on the implications of dueling pressures on the land base associated with increased demand for carbon sequestration and for bioenergy feedstocks, while also accounting for demands for global food production.
- Studying potential economic implications of alternative designs for carbon offset markets. Farmers' participation in these markets would likely be voluntary, so policy design details will influence participation decisions, the kinds of farming practices and land uses that farmers offer, and the economic efficiency and environmental performance of the offset market.
- Examining how farmers' responses to a changing climate—including changes in yields, extreme events, and pest invasions—will affect domestic crop and livestock production patterns, productivity growth, input use, crop rotations, economic returns, and environmental outcomes. Research will also address the economic implications of policy options, such as conservation programs, crop insurance, and agricultural R&D investments, for addressing climate-related increases in risk, costs, and opportunities.

OBJECTIVE 2.3 – PROTECT AND ENHANCE AMERICA'S WATER RESOURCES

ERS contributes to USDA's efforts to improve the science behind Federal water and air quality regulations and programs. As part of its analysis of environmental regulations and conservation incentive policies, ERS research provides insight into developing policies for controlling nonpoint source pollution. More generally, ERS research analyzes the economic efficiency, environmental effectiveness, and distributional implications of alternative designs of resource, conservation, environmental, and commodity programs and their linkages.

Strategies and Means

- Examining linkages between agricultural production practices and water quality and analyzing alternative policies for controlling agricultural nonpoint source pollution such as nutrient runoff. Particular attention will be paid to the costs and benefits of policy design options for addressing nutrient loadings in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.
- Examining alternative approaches to the design of markets for ecosystem services, including improved water quality, wetlands, carbon sequestration, wildlife habitat, open space, and water supplies.
- Tracking trends in irrigation management and water use and analyzing economic, institutional, and policy factors influencing water conservation.

ERS Strategic Goal 3: Provide Information to Strengthen the International Competitiveness of U.S. Agriculture

ERS research and analytical activities inform policymakers, regulators, program managers, and those shaping public debate of economic issues. The issues covered relate to adoption of economically and environmentally sustainable technologies and practices, factors affecting foreign imports of U.S. agricultural products (including products produced using biotechnology), and strategies to reduce barriers to imports and increase markets for U.S. products, including biotech crop exports.

Backgrounded by extensive data and information on trade policy and World Trade Organization (WTO) topics, ERS provides U.S. negotiators and other stakeholders with an economic perspective on the complex issues confronting the WTO. This economic research on the impact of infrastructural and trade regulations on trade levels provides decisionmakers with timely insights about their effect on the competitiveness of U.S. agriculture.

OBJECTIVE 3.1 – ENSURE U.S. AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES CONTRIBUTE TO ENHANCED GLOBAL FOOD SECURITY

The ERS research program includes an ongoing assessment of global food security. ERS provides research, analysis, and information on food security, including factors affecting food production and the ability to import food in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Commonwealth of Independent States to decisionmakers in the United States and throughout the world. In addition to the on-going efforts to understand global agricultural markets, an annual report provides an up-to-date assessment of global food security.

Strategies and Means

- Continuously developing and disseminating research and analysis on the U.S. food and agriculture sector's performance in the context of increasingly globalized markets. Key emphasis areas include the World Trade Organization (WTO), domestic policy reforms, and the structure and performance of agricultural commodity markets. In-depth analysis of agricultural market conditions and research and analysis aimed at fostering economic growth and understanding foreign market structures, round out the range of emphasis areas that enhance international competitiveness of U.S. agriculture, including biotech crops.
- Providing timely insights and analysis to support improved decision-making on issues related to food security and agricultural trade in low-income countries.
- Examining changes in food aid distribution (by program) to help determine the driving factors behind the allocation decision of donors.

OBJECTIVE 3.2 – ENHANCE THE UNITED STATES' ABILITY TO DEVELOP AND TRADE AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS DERIVED FROM NEW TECHNOLOGIES

The research program emphasizes the economic and financial structure, performance, and viability of the farm sector and of different types of farms, the state of global food security, and technological innovation. This research will help policymakers assess policy issues on innovation and the potential effects of concentration on research and market power in the agricultural inputs industry.

Strategies and Means

- Supporting the USDA and interdepartmental efforts with the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency in the biotechnology crosscut through research that addresses product impacts for farmers, and industry behavior and potential impacts from concentration in the biotechnology industry. Research and related data collection efforts are designed to capture this rapidly emerging and turbulent technological change.
- Analyzing policy incentives for performing agricultural R&D, focusing particularly on intellectual property instruments, such as patents and the licensing of publicly funded research. ERS created and continues to make available a patent database for agricultural biotechnology that will provide answers to basic questions about innovations in this area, such as who is patenting and licensing what technologies.
- Characterizing and evaluating trends in agricultural research funding and direction, both public and private, the use of various funding instruments, and key factors affecting R&D. Analysis will also examine linkages between R&D and agricultural productivity growth.

OBJECTIVE 3.3 – SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE PRODUCTION IN FOOD-INSECURE NATIONS

The ability of agriculture to provide for the growing global demand for food, feed, fiber, and fuel will ultimately be determined by improving agricultural productivity. Global food security research at ERS provides an objective assessment of the effects of agriculture production, markets, and policies on global food security. This research provides a firm basis for ERS involvement in the U.S. government-wide strategy for reducing global food insecurity. ERS food security research focuses on four key areas: assessment, market research, agricultural productivity, and policy developments.

Strategies and Means

- Developing estimates of international agricultural productivity growth, to improve our understanding regarding patterns of growth, and examining how different factors—including government policies and resources availability—influence productivity trends.
- Producing an annual Food Security Assessment covering 70 food insecure countries that analyzes the current food security situation, projects food security developments over the next decade, and analyzes the effect of alternative economic and policy alternatives on global food security. The assessment analyzes the performance of domestic, international, and regional markets and their impacts on international food security.
- Examining the effects of macroeconomic shocks and global price transmission, changes in marketing channels, and regional trading arrangements on food security.
- Conducting research on the institutional and economic factors that support long-term agricultural productivity growth in developing countries and developing “lessons learned” to support increased productivity in food insecure countries.
- Identifying and analyzing policies that support or constrain food security in developing countries. ERS examines how macro-economic shocks, such as a financial crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic, will affect global food security and trade.

ERS Strategic Goal 4: Provide Information to Improve the Nation's Nutrition and Food Safety

ERS research and analytical activities inform policymakers and other decision makers of economic issues related to improving the efficiency, efficacy, and equity of public policies and programs relating to food prices and availability, consumer food choices, nutrition and health outcomes, nutrition assistance programs, and protecting consumers from unsafe food.

ERS identifies key economic issues affecting food prices, food availability, food consumption patterns, and food safety. ERS uses sound analytical techniques to understand the immediate and long-term efficiency, efficacy, and equity consequences of alternative policies and programs aimed at ensuring access by children and adults to safe, nutritious, and balanced meals. ERS's ongoing research also addresses factors that can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of USDA and other Federal food aid programs at a time of resource scarcity.

OBJECTIVE 4.1 – INCREASE ACCESS TO NUTRITIOUS FOOD

Working closely with USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, ERS studies and evaluates the Nation's nutrition assistance programs. These programs affect the daily lives of millions of U.S. children and receive substantial Federal funding. Long-term research questions include dietary and nutritional outcomes, food program targeting and delivery, and program dynamics and administration. ERS research is designed to meet the critical information needs of USDA, the Congress, program managers, policy officials, the research community, and the public at large.

Strategies and Means

- Providing economic analysis of the food marketing system to understand factors affecting the availability and affordability of food for U.S. consumers.
- Providing enhanced annual estimates of the quantity of food available for human consumption and measures of disappearance and loss in the food system.
- Conducting economic analyses of the impacts of the Nation's domestic food and nutrition assistance programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program); the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; and the School Lunch and Breakfast Programs.
- Conducting research on food and nutrition assistance program dynamics and administration, focusing on how program needs change with economic growth and recession and how changing State welfare programs interact with food and nutrition programs.
- Building food price and food consumption databases to provide a basis for analyzing the impact of food policy.
- Providing a national assessment of the extent of low-income areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious foods and conducting research to understand the causes and consequences of low food access areas.

OBJECTIVE 4.2 – ANALYZE FOOD CHOICES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES FOR A HEALTHY DIET

ERS studies the relationships among the many factors that influence food choices and health outcomes. At the household level, research focuses on prices, income, and individual characteristics such as age, race and ethnicity, household structure, knowledge of diet and health, and nutrition education. At the industry level, research focuses on the interaction among industry, consumers, and policy. Children's food access, food security, and child and adult obesity continue to be important foci of the ERS research program. ERS research into adult and child obesity includes approaches from the emerging field of behavioral economics to investigate how biases triggered by psychological mechanisms might contribute to dietary choices and obesity.

Strategies and Means

- Providing economic analysis of how people make food choices, including demands for more healthful, nutritious, and safe food, and of the determinants of those choices, including prices, income, education, and socio-economic characteristics.
- Conducting analyses of the benefits and costs of policies to change behavior to improve diet and health, including nutrition education, labeling, advertising, taxes and subsidies, and regulation.

OBJECTIVE 4.3 – PROTECT PUBLIC HEALTH BY ENSURING ACCESS TO SAFE, PLENTIFUL, AND NUTRITIOUS FOOD

Working closely with Federal regulatory agencies to identify priorities, ERS food safety research focuses on enhancing methodologies for valuing societal benefits associated with reducing food safety risks, understanding consumer willingness to pay for safer food, assessing industry incentives to enhance food safety through new technologies and supply chain linkages, and evaluating regulatory options and change. ERS research extends to investigating the safety of food imports and the efficacy of international food safety policies and practices.

Domestic agriculture and food production are vital to the economic and societal well-being of the United States and world. Understanding how these sectors can provide adequate quantities of safe and nutritious food to the public is of paramount importance to ERS. The ERS research program meets this challenge through ongoing assessments of domestic and international food safety and animal disease events and calculations of the costs encountered by affected producers and consumers. This research program includes analysis of food safety incidents that allow researchers to examine the influence of market conditions, as well as the effectiveness of prevention and mitigation alternatives in minimizing the economic impact of these events.

Disruptions in food expenditure patterns and the supply chain related to the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for additional detailed understanding of the U.S. food supply chain. ERS research is developing a more granular understanding of the food supply chain to assist policy makers in responding to disruptions.

Strategies and Means

- Conducting food safety economics research with the goal of providing a science-based approach to valuing food safety risk reduction, assessing industry costs of food safety practices, and understanding the interrelated roles of government policy and market incentives in enhancing food safety.

- Conducting research on consumer awareness of and attitudes toward food safety risks in order to support education and outreach efforts and to improve understanding of the consumer benefits of various regulatory actions.
- Updating estimates of the costs of foodborne illness to reflect the most recent data.
- Conducting research on the impact of emerging food safety risks on consumer demand and on producer incentives.
- Assessing the costs, adoption, and incentives for food safety management in various food sectors, including analysis of supply chain relationships and the impact of regulatory and voluntary standards.
- Expanding research, modeling, and data sources that aid in analyzing emerging threats to public food safety, animal health, the U.S. food supply chain, and U.S. agriculture.

ERS 2021-2025 Management Initiatives

OVERVIEW

As a result of internal analysis and external customer input, ERS has developed eight management initiatives/objectives to maintain and enhance the objectivity, quality, depth, and breadth of the ERS research program. All initiatives will support the integrity of ERS research and will build upon this hallmark. The eight proposed initiatives are categorized into six strategic topics below, with associated objectives and strategies. Some of the recommendations are new ideas resulting from ERS’s assessment of customer, staff, and leadership feedback, while several of the recommendations build on the work accomplished as a result of the FY 2013-18 Strategic Plan’s Management Initiatives. The FY 2013-18 initiatives focused on furthering ERS’s ability to become more customer-oriented, improving visibility, aligning the performance management system with evolving strategic goals, and creating efficiencies in how ERS works. These initiatives also reflect the evolving needs of the Agency after the relocation of most Agency operations to Kansas City, MO, and government-wide and USDA initiatives.

The initiatives presented below provide a comprehensive list of opportunities based on the information gathering effort. The strategic topics, objectives, and strategies are highlighted in Table 1 and are explained in greater detail below.

Table 1: Strategic Topics and Objectives

Strategic Topic	Objectives	Strategies
Stakeholder Communication and Visibility	1. Increase usability and reach of ERS products	1.1 Continue to use the plans described in the ERS Digital Strategy to improve utility, functionality, and findability of information on the ERS website 1.2 Increase proactive and consistent engagement with stakeholders 1.3 Explore emerging communication tools to better serve existing stakeholders and reach new audiences
	2. Increase support for ERS staff to act as ambassadors for the mission	2.1 Increase communication and training of staff on the ERS mission, how their job contributes to the mission, and priorities across the Agency 2.2 Develop resources for staff use
Customer Engagement	3. Increase customer engagement to better inform research priorities and expand use of ERS products	3.1 Explore a wider range of channels to engage with customers 3.2 Seek more frequent input from customers on potential research topics
Timeliness and Relevance	4. Improve timeliness of producing research publications	4.1 Identify and adopt internal improvements to the review and clearance processes 4.2 Develop a systematic approach to research product development and execution

Strategic Topic	Objectives	Strategies
	5. Improve ability to provide publicly available products to address immediate policy questions	5.1 Develop new review and clearance process for short-turnaround products that can be made publicly available
Anticipating the Future	6. Improve the ability to identify and anticipate emerging economic and policy issues	6.1 Develop an intentional, systematic process to identify emerging economic and policy issues that is linked to priority-setting and decision-making processes
Data and Innovation	7. Foster innovations in data and analysis	7.1 Foster strategic investment in new and emerging data and technologies to explore innovation opportunities in ERS 7.2 Encourage innovation in data and research dissemination
Human Capital	8. Focus on short-term and long-term human capital goals to ensure the ERS workforce has the capability to deliver on the mission	8.1 Re-evaluate administrative, technical, and career tracks with respect to promotion potential 8.2 Align and balance performance standards and incentives to priority ERS products and activities 8.3 Encourage and further develop staff expertise on data, tools, methods, and agriculture and the food sector 8.4 Develop succession planning and backup capabilities for foundational obligations 8.5 Foster diversity by enhancing the work environment in terms of respect, professionalism, and dignity

Several initiatives are critical for ERS to amplify its impact. For each objective below, examples of ERS efforts strongly demonstrate the principles laid out in the initiative. However, in each case ERS must achieve the objective more frequently, more consistently, or more effectively to realize its full potential for impact and success. The areas in which ERS is already doing well can provide important guidance on how ERS might make the practice more pervasive and systematic across the Agency.

Initiative 1: Increase usability and reach of ERS products

In order to bring ERS’s high-quality, objective, policy-relevant work into the hands of even more decision makers, food and agriculture sector workers, and the general public, ERS will continue to improve its website as it transitions to USDA-wide standards, platforms, and shared services; develop strategies to improve our reach and relevance to users and stakeholders; and evaluate new ways to improve information dissemination to be more meaningful to users.

Strategy 1.1: Continue to use the plans described in the ERS Digital Strategy to improve quality and value of the ERS website

The ERS website is the primary way that individual's access ERS's products and services. ERS releases about a dozen research and Outlook reports to the website each month and displays information on over 80 topics and subtopics, along with approximately 80 active data products, a monthly online magazine, daily charts, and interactive data visualizations. In 2020, 3 million unique visitors generated over 8 million page views on the website.

A significant amount of work went into upgrading the website in recent years, and larger-scale improvements are planned given the rapid advances in technology, evolving user needs, and to align with nascent Federal and Departmental objectives.

Central to the Agency's mission to inform public program and policy decisions, the Digital Strategy aligns specific objectives with core values to maintain credibility with those who use ERS data and information. The Digital Strategy outlines a diverse and aspirational list of improvements—for users and for suppliers. ERS aims to provide ongoing improvements for external users whose expectations are high and rising, via innovative products and services to meet their needs—as well as supporting internal users with process improvements and easier-to-use systems. These investments in best practices to deliver the most meaningful results for our customers and stakeholders include: Improving ERS's customer experience by streamlining content, improving navigation, and providing more features/services, which will also improve usability, customer satisfaction, and search engine optimization (SEO); improving data product design and delivery; better leveraging ERS's data via new application programming interfaces (APIs), which will make the data more readily consumable by external applications and easier to manipulate; and increasing efficiencies of internal systems and processes, by using cloud hosting and other tools. All initiatives involve stakeholders in the planning and development; will be released on a rolling, iterative basis; and assessed with metrics that inform design, showcase results, and inform decisions.

The ERS website is in transition, as it advances in alignment with departmental objectives for the structure, look and feel, and technical infrastructure/hosting. ERS will review and update the Digital Strategy to accommodate and balance adoption of USDA-wide standards and platforms with existing user-centered improvement priorities. ERS will continue to engage and collaborate with department and mission-area stakeholders, including data governance boards; identify the purpose, goals, and function of the website; conduct research to inform directions and prioritize work; and carefully plan to ensure concurrent uninterrupted publishing to align its website and provide a consistent user experience with other USDA websites.

Because the website is the public face of the Agency and the primary means of disseminating ERS information, focus must remain on the quality and relevance of our content, and to ensure universal design so material is accessible and device-agnostic for easier compatibility with new devices as they emerge.

Strategy 1.2: Increase proactive and consistent communications and engagement with stakeholders

Through the information gathering effort, ERS learned that some stakeholders would welcome more frequent, ERS-initiated engagement. Engagement spanned a range of opportunities including informing research, raising awareness of products and services, and leveraging stakeholders' networks as force

multipliers for ERS communications. In order to leverage these opportunities, ERS will work with its communications function and across the organization to develop guidance and recommendations for how to increase stakeholder communications and engagement. This work will result in guiding principles for staff to follow and custom plans with specific communications and engagement activities in alignment with USDA communications policies.

Strategy 1.3: Explore emerging communication tools to better serve existing stakeholders and reach new audiences

To maximize the visibility of ERS's products and services, ERS will focus on staying current on emerging trends and methods in the realm of communications and information dissemination. By maintaining awareness of best practices and new developments, collaborating with peers in the Agency and across the department, and considering new/shared services, ERS can plan ahead and adopt new approaches when appropriate. ERS will adopt a continuous learning philosophy, review and research new trends; attend relevant conferences, webinars, and meetings on best practices in communications; and meet with other agencies' communications experts to share ideas.

Tying products with customer needs should be implemented with existing and new products. For existing products, ERS should conduct a thorough review to ensure that the product continues to meet its intended purpose. Stakeholder feedback and use analyses should be gathered for products such as *Amber Waves*, outlook reports and newsletters, research report series, and report summaries to determine the value they offer stakeholders and how that value relates to the resource investment required to produce them. For new products, researchers should be challenged to align a research project's outputs to the target audience's needs. Multiple formats of research outputs may be necessary to best meet different audiences' needs. Better targeting of products is likely to lead to a more effective use of support resources and heightened research impact.

Like the recommendation above, successful execution of this objective may require new skills and ways of working. Customers at all levels of technical knowledge expect a wide range of communication vehicles that expand well beyond the traditional scholarly writing of most research institutions. This will require training staff to write for audiences in new ways (e.g., summaries, key takeaways, charts, blogs, etc.). It also means consistently including writing and presentation skills as a hiring criterion and training opportunity, while reinforcing the importance of these skills in annual evaluations. Regardless of what set of products ends up being pursued, the objectives and expectations for these products must be clearly stated to researchers and communications staff.

Initiative 2: Increase support for ERS staff to act as ambassadors for the mission

ERS's high-quality staff were identified as a key strength of the organization during the information gathering effort. One of the reasons stakeholders appreciate ERS is the value they derive from their regular collaborations with staff. An essential aspect of increasing communications about ERS and visibility of ERS's work is to leverage and expand those relationships. ERS will focus on equipping staff with information and tools to support them in communicating about ERS.

Strategy 2.1: Increase communication and train staff on the ERS mission, how their job contributes to the mission, and priorities across the Agency

ERS is undergoing a time of transition, and it will be important to keep a regular focus on the ERS mission and the alignment of each individual's job to the mission. This needs to be clear in order for individuals to feel comfortable articulating the value of ERS to customers, stakeholders, and partners. It is also important to build situational awareness about what is happening across the organization so those messages can be shared when opportunities arise during individual conversations, in meetings, and during presentations/briefings.

ERS will renew an emphasis on supporting staff understanding of the mission and cross-organizational work by identifying existing information to share and potential areas of confusion. ERS will then develop strategies to amplify messaging about existing information and address identified concerns. This could include individual conversations, team meetings, off-site meetings, All-Staff presentations, and re-invigorating existing channels, such as *Food for Thought* seminars.

Strategy 2.2: Develop resources for staff use

To foster staff readiness to share key messages with stakeholders, customers, and partners when opportunities arise, ERS will develop a toolbox of communications resources. This may include materials such as brief talking points on ERS's mission, current priorities, and recent product releases; a glossary of frequently used terms; and topic descriptions. In addition to the toolbox, ERS will update and share materials describing ERS's stakeholders, customers, and partners, to bring renewed clarity and understanding in this changing environment.

Initiative 3: Increase customer engagement to better inform research priorities and expand use of ERS products

Our customers and partners support ERS's research topic ideation, collaborate on data and research, consume the information, and expand the reach of ERS's products and services. Therefore, it's critical to maintain and expand these relationships to support mission delivery. Work was done as part of the previous strategic plan to increase communication and collaboration during the early phases of the research process and leverage partnerships and extramural funding to complement ERS's capabilities. Over the next five years ERS will renew its emphasis on finding ways to engage customers and build awareness of ERS's data and research products.

ERS will amplify customer engagement through multiple efforts. These include expanding engagement channels, increasing the frequency of communications, and seeking more input on potential research topics. These efforts will result in more informed research priorities and increased product usage.

Strategy 3.1: Explore a wider range of channels to engage with customers

In order to expand ERS's customer base, the Agency will explore new engagement channels and look for ways to reinvigorate existing channels. Channels could include meetings, workshops, social media, email, calls, and newsletters. ERS will identify the channels used across ERS's division and branches and discuss best practices and lessons learned from each channel. ERS will also discuss with other agencies their techniques and conduct a review of the emerging engagement ideas identified as part of Objective 1.3. Once best practices are considered, ERS will develop and implement a plan to expand its existing engagement efforts, continually watching for new opportunities. This may include pilot testing ideas and seeking feedback from customers on their experience to refine the engagement approaches.

Strategy 3.2: Seek more frequent input from customers on potential research topics

ERS has a wide breadth of customers who can offer inspiration and input to help solidify research topics. These customers include other agencies and mission areas within USDA. ERS has increased engagement with customers in the early stages of research over the past five years and would like to expand this engagement to ensure relevant and timely input. Effective engagement with customers and stakeholders will allow them to have a voice at critical moments or enable them to provide feedback on a broad array of activities at once. This should include inviting customers into ERS to share trends and challenges they face through cross cutting teams rather than on a project-by-project approach. Identifying strategic opportunities to engage with customers on topic ideas could enhance the relevance, timeliness, and interest in the resulting products.

ERS research informs decisions made in the program areas of every USDA mission area and ERS has deep relationships across the Department. ERS will continue to engage with the other mission areas, meeting regularly to discuss research ideas and products that make ERS research more relevant and applicable to the work of USDA agencies and decisionmakers.

Initiative 4: Improve timeliness of producing research publications

Trends show increased expectations for government efficiency and a demand for timely information. Feedback provided during information gathering by ERS's customers, leadership, and staff echoed these expectations. ERS focused on creating efficiencies in the last strategic plan by leveraging collaboration and partnerships. ERS also responded to this need by introducing a new product called *Charts of Note* which consists of a daily chart sent by email highlighting ERS research findings. Over the next five years, ERS will take a more internal view of efficiency, looking for new ways to deliver products more quickly to enhance timeliness and policy-relevance while maintaining the quality that differentiates ERS as a source of credible, objective information.

ERS's high-quality research is one of the Agency's greatest strengths and a foundation upon which all of its products are built. Producing credible research takes time, yet ERS faces pressures to deliver as quickly as possible. In order to increase the timeliness of research publications ERS will explore ways to improve the review and clearance processes for its products and take a broader look at the research development process.

Strategy 4.1: Identify and adopt internal improvements to the review and clearance processes

During information gathering, ERS customers, leadership, and staff identified the review and clearance processes as potential areas for improvement that could result in the release of information more quickly and potentially increase the policy relevance of ERS's work. ERS will apply process improvement methods to map out the current review and clearance processes, identify potential points of delay/inefficiency, and refine the processes to increase timeliness of publication. While proposing improvements, ERS will consider risks to accuracy, interpretation, and objectivity. ERS will also explore if the review and clearance processes could vary based on the type of product.

Strategy 4.2: Develop a systematic approach to research product development and execution

ERS researchers apply a variety of approaches to develop research concepts, conduct the research, and deliver the results. This intellectual freedom allows the space for creativity and objectivity. ERS would like to explore possible ways to provide some standardization in approach while maintaining the flexibility required in research. Some divisions within ERS have worked to refine the entire research process, from idea conception, to production, to review and publication. ERS will explore improvements and best practices across the Agency and compare those with best practices from other research organizations, both Federal and non-Federal. ERS will then determine if opportunities exist to implement a more systematic approach to research product development and execution across the organization.

Initiative 5: Improve processes to more quickly develop and disseminate products to address immediate/emerging policy questions

Demand for timely products that address current policy concerns continues to increase. ERS has increased its work in delivering quick-turnaround analysis to government officials in recent years, and has created shorter, digestible products such as Charts of Note and a Working Paper Series. However, ERS sees an opportunity to find ways to improve these processes to make additional information available to the public more quickly.

Strategy 5.1: Institutionalize the review and clearance process for short-turnaround products that can be made publicly available

ERS will explore options for continuing to develop short-turnaround products that maintain quality and meet the needs of our customers. The review and clearance process would be designed to decrease the time from submission to approval and publication for shorter policy and economic briefs. As part of this effort, ERS would identify the types of products subject to the new review and clearance process.

Initiative 6: Improve the ability to identify and anticipate emerging economic and policy issues

Food and agriculture industries are rapidly changing, driven by new technologies and markets. ERS's customers, leadership, and staff identified the changing face of agriculture and food retail, and farm and

retail demographics, as two emerging trends for ERS focus in the future. As ERS's mission is to "anticipate trends and emerging issues in agriculture, food, the environment, and rural areas of the United States," the Agency is committed to continually keep a pulse on these developments. Over the next five years ERS will seek opportunities to strengthen the Agency's ability to identify and address emerging economic and policy issues.

ERS is dedicated to understanding both current and emerging issues affecting the food and agriculture sectors. The information gathering effort identified an opportunity for ERS to be more intentional in identifying emerging developments that could have impacts in three, five, or ten years. In the spirit of continuous improvement, the Agency will explore ways to create a systematic process to identify emerging developments to foster collaboration and learning across ERS.

Strategy 6.1: Develop an intentional, systematic process for identifying emerging economic and policy issues that is linked to priority-setting and decision-making processes

ERS will review existing processes for trend and issue scanning and identify best practices and opportunities for improvement. The Agency will determine how to best structure this process and incorporate opportunities for integration across topics. Idea scanning could include a combination of desktop research, customer engagement, working groups, and participation in relevant industry events.

Once the process is refined, ERS will consider how to integrate findings into strategic planning, annual priority setting, and ongoing decision-making processes. This critical step will enable ERS to consider emerging trends and issues more consistently and comprehensively when choosing how to invest resources.

Initiative 7: Foster innovations in data and analysis

The world of data is rapidly evolving with new, alternative sources emerging. Advancements continue in analytical and predictive capabilities and the presentation and dissemination of the resulting information in more useful ways. ERS is exploring how to use these new sources of data to complement its work while considering associated privacy challenges. The Agency is adopting new data types and approaches and searching for ways to use administrative data. Over the next five years, ERS will continue to foster innovation in the Agency's use of data and approach to analysis.

ERS will encourage continued innovation in data and analysis by creating an organizational function dedicated to this work, improving the dissemination of ERS's data and research via the website, and investing in new and emerging data sources. These efforts will allow the Agency to continue its position at the forefront of the government's efforts to effectively use emerging data and research methodologies.

Strategy 7.1: Foster strategic investment in new and emerging data and technology functions to explore further innovation opportunities in ERS

ERS will facilitate efforts to leverage new data and technologies by establishing a committee to explore emerging data and supporting technologies. The committee will review data and technology sources, explore how they could be used to advance ERS's mission, and obtain the new data and technologies. The decisions about which technologies to invest in will be made in accordance with departmental objectives, Agency strategy, priorities, and anticipated customer needs. ERS will examine how other public and private sector organizations are structured to allow for ongoing assessment of new data, and what is occurring within ERS, to determine how best to support this work. ERS will also consider new ways to improve engagement with customers and partners.

Strategy 7.2: Encourage innovation in data and research dissemination

The addition of robust data science capability will be used to identify, acquire, process, clean, and store data so that it is accessible to researchers and ready to use in studies and expanding analytics and data investigation (links to 7 and 7.1). This improved understanding of available data will help researchers identify data that best suits their needs. Data experts can assist researchers by sharing their knowledge as well as offering advice on which modeling techniques are most suited for the diverse ERS data holdings. Communication techniques and technologies continue to evolve, creating new opportunities to share the results of ERS's work. ERS will continue to evolve with best practices; collaborate with departmental and mission area approaches for new analytics platforms, tools, and services; establish a Data Governance Board and data stewardship; and improve processes supporting its work and users. This initiative closely links with Objectives 1.1 and 1.3, related to exploring advances in communication technology and the functionality of the ERS website.

Initiative 8: Focus on short-term and long-term human capital goals to ensure the workforce has the capability to deliver on the mission

The work environment continues to rapidly evolve, with new expectations emerging from employers and employees. Employers seek both technical and soft skills, and expect employees to use emerging technologies, data, and communication channels. Employees seek greater non-monetary benefits and fulfillment at work. The makeup of the workforce is also evolving with a rising share of older workers delaying retirement, leading to growing workplace generational divides, and a desire for more diverse, inclusive environments. In addition to over-arching external trends, ERS experienced high attrition during the Agency realignment and relocation to Kansas City, and will continue to rebuild and retain its workforce over the next five years.

The information gathering effort highlighted that ERS's workforce is one of its greatest strengths. The effort also shed light on recruitment, training, and retention challenges before the relocation that continue to be relevant during the current workforce rebuilding. In order to capitalize on these strengths and address some of the challenges, ERS will undertake multiple initiatives to support the workforce as rebuilding continues over the next five years. ERS will assess career paths, align performance expectations to strategic priorities, invest in staff development, conduct succession planning, and foster a work environment that supports diversity and inclusion. These efforts will enable ERS to continue offering a positive work environment to attract and retain the skilled workforce needed to deliver ERS's mission.

Strategy 8.1: Re-evaluate administrative, technical, and career tracks with respect to promotion potential

ERS will conduct an assessment to understand more about the benefits and challenges of ERS's career tracks. The assessment will consider existing information via review of current career tracks, the Employee Engagement Council recommendations, and the strategic planning information gathering effort. This will include considering how other agencies handle career tracks and promotions and determining whether to keep separate career paths for research economists and career-ladder employees. This work will examine if ERS has position descriptions with sufficient flexibility given rapid advances in data, communications, and technology. The intent is to ensure that ERS has optimal career advancement opportunities to attract and retain employees.

Strategy 8.2: Align and balance performance standards and incentives to priority ERS products and activities

A critical success factor to achieve ERS's strategic priorities is aligning performance expectations and associated incentives to the desired areas of focus. In line with USDA policy, ERS will award specific actions that further the mission of the Agency. The work completed as a result of the FY 2013-18 strategic plan supplies a foundation to build on, as ERS established organizational performance metrics and cascaded them to individual plans.

ERS's organizational performance metrics will be reviewed to determine if they align with the new strategy and additional metrics may be created to track progress on the strategy. ERS leadership will then work together and with their staff to determine how each individual, team, branch, division, and office can measure performance to align with the strategic direction. In addition to rewarding successes through the performance management process, ERS will explore other means of formal and informal recognition to celebrate progress on achieving the strategy.

Strategy 8.3: Encourage and further develop staff expertise on data, tools, methods, and the agriculture and food sectors

ERS will invest in staff development to support individuals' professional growth and abilities. In order to determine how to best focus development efforts, ERS will conduct a skills assessment to identify gaps. The assessment will include targeted questions to uncover opportunities for growth in areas that would advance the strategy. Questions may address information delivery; knowledge of the agriculture and food sector policies, programs, and trends; methodology; and data management, analysis, and visualization. ERS will then develop a program to support professional development in key areas identified. This program will involve a mix of growth opportunities including training, mentoring, coaching, and informal learning.

Strategy 8.4: Develop succession planning and backup capabilities for foundational obligations

ERS's work spans a wide breadth of topics, which can lead to situations where only one or two people are responsible for foundational work, especially following attrition in the wake of the relocation to Kansas City.

ERS will develop and implement a succession planning strategy that will require regular updates and assessments. This may include hiring in targeted areas, cross training, knowledge transfer, mentoring, other professional development, and incentives for staff to act as backups (links to 8.1).

Strategy 8.5: Foster diversity by enhancing the work environment in terms of respect, professionalism, and dignity

ERS is dedicated to having a diverse workforce and a workplace that promotes civil rights, diversity, and inclusion. ERS will focus on learning and modeling behaviors that encourage respect, professionalism, and dignity as part of the culture of the Agency. This will include training, targeted hiring outreach, special emphasis programs, and onboarding activities.

Insights from Customer Feedback

In addition to conducting research and analysis that cover broad topic areas, ERS must also manage its resources efficiently and be responsive to its customers and stakeholders. In September 2017, ERS launched an organization-wide strategic planning process to assess ERS's ability to deliver its products and services more effectively and to identify ways to improve delivery through enhancements in staff and resource capacity, technological innovation, process efficiency, and stakeholder outreach. The management initiatives that emerged from the planning process were designed to be applicable despite potential changes in Agency budget, structure, or mission focus. In late 2020, ERS revisited the initial draft plan and revised some elements to strengthen the plan's relevance to current Agency and Departmental circumstances, though the fundamental insights and initiatives remain sound. Specific goals included:

1. Develop an updated framework for prioritizing work and allocating resources.
2. Identify opportunities for ERS to do its work better.
3. Incorporate civil rights initiatives and activities into the broader ERS Strategic Plan.

ERS conducted 27 interviews with customers who could speak broadly about food and agriculture and the role of ERS. These interviews produced many interesting findings that confirmed the role of ERS research while also presenting opportunities for improvement. The insights listed below use feedback from the information gathering effort with a forward-looking approach to the management and improvement of ERS.

Insight 1: ERS has a strong reputation and many strengths to maintain and grow over the next five years

Strengths of ERS include high-quality, credible data and research; objectivity; access to unique data and information; and high-quality staff with food and agriculture expertise; national scope, and policy-relevant work. Considering the greatest challenges and competition ERS might face over the next five years, ERS should continue to focus on innovation in data and research methods, increasing visibility, delivering timely, customer-oriented products and services, and human capital planning and management. While these challenges were offered for consideration, ERS's strengths were often referred to by customers and leadership as a competitive advantage, indicating an opportunity exists to build on them. ERS will need to consider how to leverage its strengths and how to address some of the challenges without compromising its strengths.

Insight 2: ERS has a diverse set of stakeholders with varying data, research, and accessibility needs, which results in tensions around prioritization and allocation of resources

ERS serves multiple stakeholders from food and agricultural policy and decision makers, to industry organizations, other Federal agencies, private companies, farmers and ranchers, and the broader U.S. public. Having such a broad mission and reach can result in conflicting demands for a variety of products and services. These include quick turnaround work, short summaries, quick facts, raw data, data analysis, and in-depth research. To meet this demand, ERS delivers a variety of products and continually looks for ways to address requests for more timely, accessible, and/or user-friendly products. These broad expectations can create tension in terms of prioritizing ERS's work and aligning resources and performance expectations. Deciding how to find the right balance and incentivizing the associated work are key challenges facing ERS.

Insight 3: Maintaining and expanding relationships with customers, stakeholders, and partners is critical to ERS's ability to deliver its mission

ERS customers, staff focus group participants, and leadership emphasized the importance of relationship building during the information gathering effort. Some of the benefits of relationships cited during the interviews and focus groups included: efficiencies in product development, products that are aligned to customer needs, products that support stakeholder priorities, opportunities to collaborate and innovate, and increased visibility and support for ERS's work. ERS leadership and staff focus group participants also shared that they would like to continue to collaborate with stakeholders throughout the research process, and they see ongoing exchanges of information as a positive impact on the relevance and quality of ERS's work. Given the benefits of relationship building, ERS customers, leadership, and staff encouraged an increased focus on engagement over the next five years. ERS will need to determine the right level of investment in relationship building, how to leverage existing relationships, and what new channels can be used to expand relationships.

Insight 4: ERS has an opportunity to continue leading the government's efforts to anticipate future food and agricultural developments and explore emerging data and research methodologies

The world of data and research is rapidly changing. New forms of data are becoming available, enhanced analytical and predictive capabilities are emerging, and a growing focus on new economic theories and methods in policy-related work exists. These developments are accompanied by potential challenges, including cybersecurity risks and concerns about survey data availability, reliability, and quality. All groups participating in the information gathering effort indicated that ERS should continue to explore new data and research methods to maintain the relevance and impact of ERS's work in the future. This could include building on existing innovations such as the use of administrative data and exploring leveraging new forms of data, potentially through partnerships. Customers and ERS leadership also shared that ERS can work toward identifying developments in food and agriculture that may be five to ten years away that could inform ERS's research questions. ERS will need to consider how to evolve its data and research approaches given the rapid pace of change.

Insight 5: Recruiting and retaining the workforce required to achieve ERS's mission and vision is a key challenge facing the organization

The people of ERS were cited as one of the organization's greatest strengths during the information gathering effort. The effort also shed light on concern about rebuilding, recruiting, and retaining the workforce over the next five years following high attrition during the realignment and relocation to Kansas City. ERS's previous success with hiring qualified candidates will be an important asset during the rebuilding process. In terms of retention, ERS leadership and staff focus group participants shared a concern that staff morale was decreasing before the relocation and should be prioritized in planning for the future. Specific morale challenges referenced included the uncertain budget environment, career paths, promotion limits for certain positions, competitiveness of ERS salaries, succession planning, and the promotion review process. Concern was expressed around the recruitment and retention of ERS's Situation and Outlook staff. ERS will need to consider long-term workforce challenges while concentrating on the short-term rebuilding process to both attract and retain this highly valued workforce.