USDA Economic Research Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

A report summary from the Economic Research Service

Cooperative Extension in Transition: Trends Through 2024

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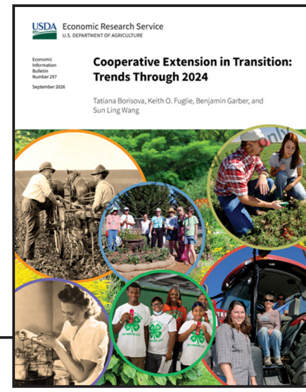


Key Points

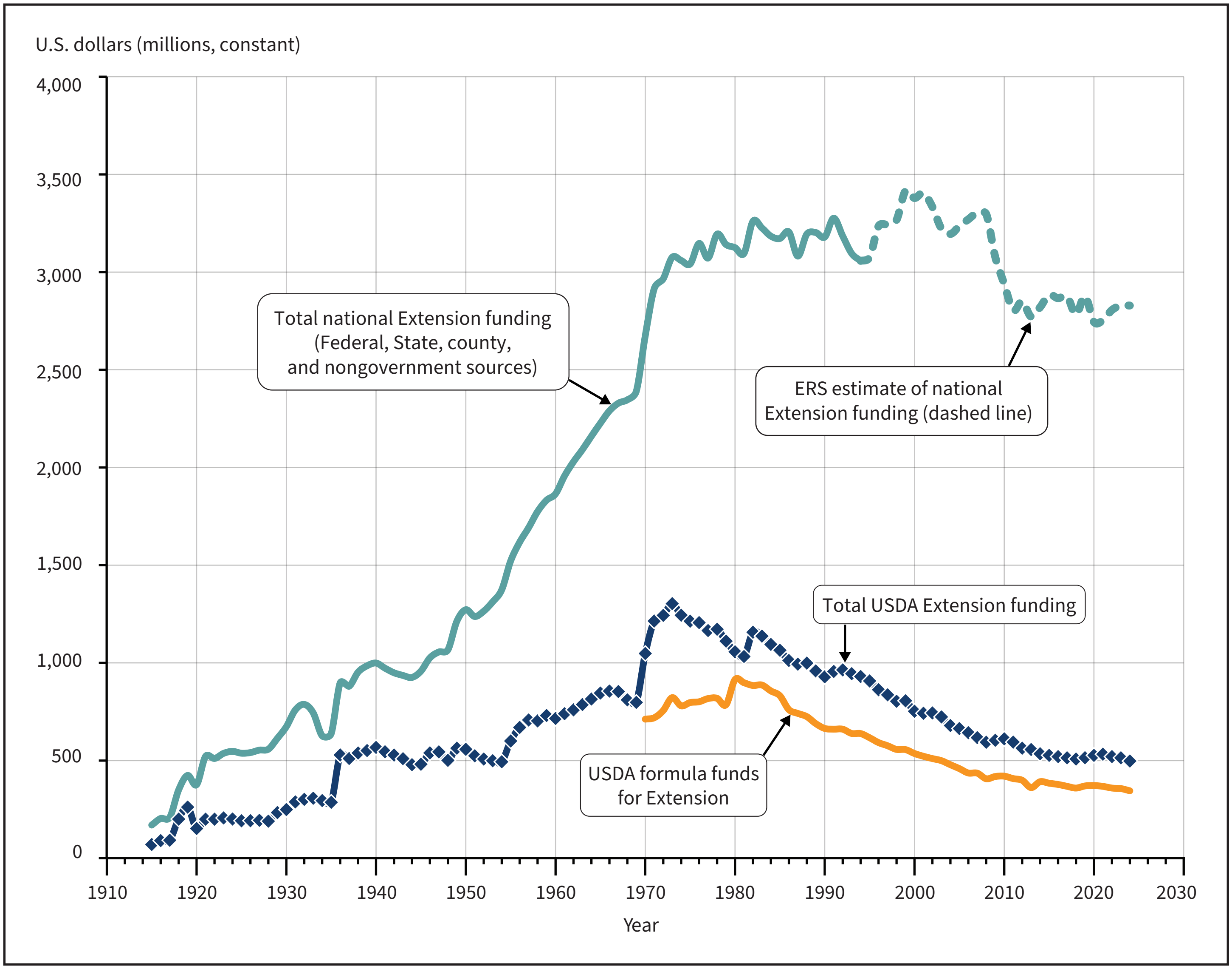
- Total funding for Cooperative Extension grew from 1915 to 1973, stabilized at $3.0–$3.4 billion per year during 1973–2008, and declined slightly to $2.7–$2.9 billion since 2012 as measured in 2020 dollars.
- USDA funding for Extension has fallen about 60 percent from $1.3 billion in 1973 to $498 million in 2024 (in 2020 dollars). State and county governments, along with other sources, supplement Federal funds for Extension.
- The decline in USDA and total funding for Cooperative Extension have led to smaller full-time extension staffs. The number of full-time Extension staff shrank by an estimated 26 percent from 1979 to 2024. The share of full-time employees working in agriculture and natural resources Extension declined from 44 percent to 40 percent, when averages for 1977 to 1992 and 2007 to 2018 are calculated. The share of employees devoted to youth education has fallen from 26 percent to 18 percent in that same period.
- The changes in funding and staffing levels have impacted U.S. regions differently. The North Central and Southern regions have seen the largest decline in full-time staff numbers from 1980 to 2024 at 37 and 23 percent, respectively.

Why Does This Matter?

The U.S. Cooperative Extension System provides non-formal education and advisory services to farmers, rural and non-rural households, and communities. Cooperative Extension operates through the system of land-grant colleges and universities in partnership with Federal, State, and local governments. The USDA's National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA) currently provides the funding and leadership for Cooperative Extension at the Federal level. Improving farming and agricultural practices was the primary rationale behind the creation of the agricultural Extension system but the program's mission has expanded to include the broader goal of enhancing rural and non-rural living conditions. Extension programming varies based on region and customer needs, but generally falls into agriculture and natural resources; family, community, and economic development; human nutrition, health, and food safety; and youth activities and 4-H program areas. Previous research has shown a reduction in Federal funding for Extension, a decline in the share of Federal funds in Extension's overall expenditures, and the loss of full-time Extension staff. This report extends that research past 2010 and assesses long-term trends in funding, staffing, and resource allocation across Extension programs at the national and regional levels. Personnel and total funding trends are estimated and are based on assumptions because comprehensive data are no longer collected by Federal agencies.

A Few More Details

Funding of Cooperative Extension since 1915 in constant 2020 dollars adjusted for the cost of extension service provision



Note: Federal funds for Extension include formula and non-formula Extension grants. Annual expenditures were adjusted for inflation by the Biomedical Research and Development Price Index (NIH, 2024) over 1950–2024 and extended backward to 1915 using the agricultural research and development price index in Huffman and Evenson (2006).

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) using data from Huffman and Evenson (2006); Alston et al. (2010); USDA, National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA), Research, Education, and Economics Information System database; USDA, National Institute for Food and Agriculture, Annual Reports of Accomplishments; and USDA Budget Summary and Annual Performance Plans.

The Federal share of total Cooperative Extension funding fell by more than half from 1971–75 to 2019–24, dropping from 42 percent in 1973 to under 20 percent. In response to this decline in Federal funding, State Extension programs have diversified their funding sources. In addition to traditional funding from Federal capacity grants (which are allocated based on statutory formulas and generally require a 1:1 State funding match), a large share of Extension funding is now associated with project grants, county funding, and user fees. In other words, a greater portion of funding has shifted from unrestricted capacity grants to funds that are restricted to specific topics and duration.