

ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE

Strategic Plan

FY 2013-2018



United States
Department of Agriculture

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Message from the Administrator



USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) anticipates trends and emerging issues related to food, agriculture, natural resources, and rural America 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, independent, timely, relevant, and high-quality economic research, analysis, and data to broadly enhance the understanding of economic issues affecting food and agriculture.

We have designed our research and management practices 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 is available through the ERS website (<http://www.ers.usda.gov>) and is published in a variety of mediums, such as research monographs, ERS periodicals, journals, and presentations outside ERS. For all products, the overriding goal is high-quality, objective economic analysis communicated in a useful and informative manner.

Strategic planning at ERS ensures the relevancy and efficiency of Agency research and analysis. ERS involves stakeholders in discussions regarding the retrospective 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 Agency as described in the USDA Strategic Plan for FY 2010-15, as well as the goals of the Research, Education and Economics (REE) Action Plan and the recommendations of a recent ERS strategic planning exercise. Central to the plan is the effective management of the Agency's limited 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 our customers. ERS looks forward to ongoing input from its customers and stakeholders to keep the Agency's research focus sharp and to ensure effective anticipation of the future needs of agricultural, food, resource, and rural economic program and policy decisionmakers.

Mary Bohman
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

Economic Research Service is:

- A dynamic organization providing and supporting high quality, objective, and relevant economic and social science research and analysis.
- Recognized as a premier organization that offers cutting-edge research, highly valued economic and social science research, and analytical information to address the needs of a rapidly evolving food and agriculture system.
- Recognized for providing 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 50 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 Americans and others 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 Statistics:¹

- 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.
- 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 survey respondents and administrative records custodians, 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 policymaking 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 collection, analysis, and reporting processes

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

might be manipulated for political purposes or that individually identifiable data might be turned over for administrative, regulatory, or law enforcement purposes.

Civil Rights Commitment

Consistent with USDA civil rights policies, ERS firmly enforces all Federal civil rights laws, Executive orders, and regulations. Treating all employees, job applicants, and customers with fairness, equality, and respect is a core Agency value. ERS prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, age, national origin, religion, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status in all of its programs and activities. The Agency maintains a discrimination-free workplace at its office and protects all employees, job applicants, and customers from sexual and nonsexual harassment, retaliation, and reprisal. ERS cultivates an inclusive workplace environment where the unique qualities, experiences, and talents of every employee are valued, nurtured, and appreciated.

Customers and Stakeholders

ERS stakeholders are its customers and partners, its staff, cooperators, and contractors. The ultimate beneficiaries of ERS's programs are the American people, whose well-being is improved by well-informed public and private decisionmaking.

ERS has identified its customers to be policymakers and key institutions that routinely make or influence public policy and program decisions. ERS shapes its programs and products principally to serve these key decisionmakers: USDA and White House policy officials and program managers; the U.S. Congress; other Federal agencies; State and local government officials; and domestic and international commodity, environmental, agribusiness, consumer, and other groups interested in public policy issues.

Key External Factors

ERS's success depends on its role as a national center of excellence for economic analysis on agriculture, food and nutrition, environmental, and rural issues. Policymakers and program managers are increasingly called upon to assess the efficiency and equity consequences of public policies, regulations, and programs. The demand for more and better information is accelerating in today's knowledge-based and increasingly complex society. ERS's role in informing and analyzing alternative public programs and policies is therefore growing in importance.

At the same time, ERS is being asked to do more with declining real resources. Essential to an effective response to these demands is telecommunication and computer technology developments that can enhance analytical capabilities and improve communication with customers and partners. ERS recognizes that getting its research and analysis to key customers in the form they want and at the time they need matches the importance of doing excellent work on relevant topics. The Agency must continue to invest in integrating useful new information technologies into Agency operations. Innovation is key to ERS's ability to do more with fewer staff resources. Clearly, the internet and emerging social media networks have offered significant opportunities for providing real-time information to customers in easily usable forms. ERS takes advantage of these opportunities by using the ERS website as its principal tool, along with social media outlets and smart device applications, for communicating with customers. The Agency will need to sustain and constantly upgrade its efforts in this area. Increasing flexibility in procurement and personnel regulations also offers new opportunities for a more responsive, adaptable, and efficient ERS.

National employment trends affect ERS's ability to obtain and retain a highly skilled and technically competent ERS workforce. The high level of academic training required for economic and other social science research and the need to achieve a more diverse workforce mean that ERS will continue its emphasis on recruitment, retention, student employment, career enhancement, training, and retraining programs.

Changes in the larger policy context in which ERS operates will influence the content and orientation of ERS research and analysis. Changing perceptions about the role of government regulation have accelerated the search for effective and voluntary market-oriented measures as alternatives to traditional farm programs. In addition, the increasing scale and concentration of agricultural activities have raised environmental issues pertaining to waste management and issues about the role of market power. Rapidly changing economic, social, and medical environments have raised challenging questions about the nutritional quality and costs of good diets and food safety and their implications for individuals, society, and the food industry.

International trade agreements are shifting the focus of trade disputes away from tariffs and toward issues relating to technical barriers to trade, such as labeling of genetically engineered products and sanitary and phytosanitary measures that are not science based. Continued evolution of the demographic, economic, and industrial structure of rural areas will change policy debates regarding the well-being of rural people and communities. Finally and significantly, the continued growth of grain-based ethanol production and commercializing ethanol from other sources of biomass underscores the need for examining the influence of bioenergy and bioenergy policy on domestic and global agricultural markets, natural resources, the environment, rural communities, and implications for food prices. Through its contacts with policymakers and academic experts, as well as the recognized expertise of its staff, ERS expects to keep pace with change as and before it occurs.

Strategic Plan Framework

For nearly a century, ERS and its predecessor agencies have supported USDA programs with the economic data, research, and analysis needed for sound decisionmaking. ERS continues to inform and enhance public and private decisionmaking on economic and policy issues related to agriculture and rural development, which were the same central concerns of USDA economic research activity in the early 1900s. However, ERS's mission today has broadened to reflect the changing environment of our food and agriculture system, and it now includes research on such topics as food safety and nutrition, natural resources, conservation, and the environment.

ERS provides objective and quality research that aligns with and complements USDA’s four strategic goals and the relevant USDA strategic objectives:

USDA Strategic Goals	ERS Strategic Objectives
Goal 1 - Assist Rural Communities To Create Prosperity So They Are Self-Sustaining, Repopulating, and Economically Thriving	1.1 Enhance Rural Prosperity
	1.2 Create Thriving Communities
	1.3 Support a Sustainable and Competitive Agricultural System
Goal 2 - Ensure that Our National Forests and Private Working Lands Are Conserved, Restored, and Made More Resilient to Climate Change, While Enhancing Our Water Resources	2.1 Restore and Conserve the Nation’s Forests, Farms, Ranches, and Grasslands
	2.2 Lead Efforts To Mitigate and Adapt to Climate Change
	2.3 Protect and Enhance America’s Water Resources
Goal 3 - Help America Promote Agricultural Production and Biotechnology Exports as America Works To Increase Food Security	3.1 Ensure that U.S. Agricultural Resources Contribute to Enhanced Global Food Security
	3.2 Enhance America’s Ability To Develop and Trade Agricultural Products Derived from New Technologies
	3.3 Support Sustainable Agriculture Production in Food-Insecure Nations
Goal 4 - Ensure that All of America’s Children Have Access to Safe, Nutritious, and Balanced Meals	4.1 Increase Access to Nutritious Food
	4.2 Promote Healthy Diet
	4.3 Protect Public Health by Ensuring that Food Is Safe

Strategic Goal 1: Assist Rural Communities to Create Prosperity So They Are Self-Sustaining, Repopulating, and Economically Thriving

ERS research and analytical activities 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. These issues include factors related to farm finances and investments in rural people, businesses, and communities. ERS activities also are designed to enhance understanding of economic issues related to the performance of all sizes of American farms.

ERS identifies key economic issues related to rural economic development, farm viability, rural household wealth and well-being, and competitiveness. ERS also 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 a 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 the quality of life for rural Americans. 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 America's capacity to prosper.
- Monitoring changing economic and demographic trends in rural America, 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 a 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 farm policy; competitive pressures that reward innovative production and management systems and increase demand for highly skilled labor; and an aging population.
- Examining the impacts of new trends and developments, such as broadband, new and expanding energy sources and needs, local food systems, and bioenergy investments on rural community employment and income.
- Conducting research to better characterize and understand driving factors in the resilience of rural businesses and entrepreneurs in the face of global change.
- Conducting research to better understand the role and effectiveness of investments in infrastructure, housing, business development, health, education, and rural amenities for sustaining rural communities, and how these investments can work together to generate regional wealth.

Objective 1.3 – Support a Sustainable and Competitive Agricultural System

ERS research and analysis provides insight into commodity markets and financial conditions facing U.S. agriculture, avenues for innovation, market expansion, and use of natural resources. In addition, ERS programs identify and analyze market structure and technological developments that affect efficiency and profitability. The programs also include 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 farmers and ranchers, agribusinesses, and other stakeholders 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, and information systems of new technology in the U.S. and global agricultural, agribusiness, food manufacturing, processing, wholesale, retail, and food service industries.
- Continuing the annual Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS) to analyze farmers' finances, production practices and costs, use of natural resources, and household economic well-being.

Strategic Goal 2: Ensure that Our National Forests and Private Working Lands Are Conserved, Restored, and Made More Resilient to Climate Change, While Enhancing Our Water Resources

ERS research and analytical activities are designed to 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 that respond to the challenges of climate change 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. The Agency also uses sound 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 and climate change 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, 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

- Examining the environmental effectiveness, economic efficiency, and distributional implications of design options for conservation and environmental programs, including markets for ecosystem services. Design features of interest 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 all 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 Climate Change

The ERS climate change research program develops models and other analytical techniques to predict the responses of farmers to greenhouse gas (GHG) mitigation options and evaluates the opportunities and costs of adapting to a changing climate. The ERS climate change research program builds on extensive expertise on the economics of land use and land management, technology adoption, conservation program design, and biofuels development, as well as the value and dissemination of public investment in research and development (R&D).

Strategies and Means

- Assessing the economic and environmental implications of climate and energy policies. ERS analysis focuses 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.
- Examining the consequences of domestic and international climate and energy policies for U.S. and global agricultural trade.
- 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.

Strategic Goal 3: Help America Promote Agricultural Production and Biotechnology Exports as America Works to Increase Food Security

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

ERS identifies key economic issues related to the competitiveness and sustainability of farm economies, including economic factors guiding the development and adoption of agricultural biotechnology. ERS also uses sound analytical techniques to understand the immediate and broader economic and social consequences of alternative policies and programs, and the effects of changing macroeconomic and market conditions on farm economies.

ERS pursues a range of activities to provide policymakers and other decisionmakers with assessments of current programs and alternative outcomes for pending or prospective policy decisions. Results help shape public debate on commodity, technological, and economic issues.

ERS trade policy research examines critical trade reform questions asked by trade negotiators and policy analysts. This includes trade barrier research that examines the impact of infrastructural and trade regulations on trade levels and provides decisionmakers with timely insights about the effect of trade barriers on the competitiveness of U.S. agriculture.

Objective 3.1 – Ensure That 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 and the Caribbean, and the Commonwealth of Independent States to decisionmakers in the United States and throughout the world. An annual report provides an up-to-date assessment of global food security.

Strategies and Means

- Providing detailed analysis of domestic and global commodity markets to encourage more informed production and marketing decisions and efficient use of resources. Key emphasis areas include trade agreements, regional and multilateral, 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, analysis, and data to support improved decisionmaking on issues related to food security and trade in low-income countries.

Objective 3.2 – Enhance America’s 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 helps policymakers assess policy issues on innovation and the potential effects of concentration on research and market power in agricultural inputs industries.

Strategies and Means

- Developing estimates of U.S. and State-level agricultural productivity growth to improve our understanding of the factors influencing major productivity sources in U.S. agriculture, including commodity policy, research investment trends, infrastructure, changes in competing markets, and other factors.
- Supporting the USDA Biotechnology Coordinating Council and interdepartmental efforts with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in the biotechnology crosscut through research that addresses both 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 some 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 the direction—both public and private—of various funding instruments, and key factors affecting R&D. Analysis also will 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 needs 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 76 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 options 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.

Strategic Goal 4: Ensure that All of America's Children Have Access to Safe, Nutritious, and Balanced Meals

ERS research and analytical activities are designed to inform policymakers and other decisionmakers of economic issues related to improving the 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 also uses sound analytical techniques to understand the immediate and long-term efficacy and equity consequences of alternative policies and programs aimed at ensuring access by children and adults to safe, nutritious, and balanced meals. ERS' ongoing research also addresses factors that can improve the effectiveness of USDA and other Federal food aid programs at a time of resource scarcity. ERS effectively communicates research results to policymakers, program managers, and those shaping efforts to promote abundant, safe, and healthful food.

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 America'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 U.S. 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 American 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 nutrition assistance programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and the School Lunch and School 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.
- Assessing the extent of people and neighborhoods with limited access to affordable and nutritious food and carrying out research to understand how access limitations are related to food shopping behavior, diet quality, food security, and food assistance program participation.

Objective 4.2 – Promote Healthy Diet

ERS studies the relationship among the many factors that influence food choices and health outcomes. At the household level, research focuses on factors like 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 taken from the emerging field of behavioral economics to investigate how biases triggered by psychological mechanisms might contribute to poor 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 socioeconomic characteristics.
- Conducting analyses of the benefits and costs of policies to change behavior to improve diet and health, including nutrition education, food labeling, advertising, taxes and subsidies, and regulation.

Objective 4.3 – Protect Public Health by Ensuring That Food Is Safe

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 safe 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.

Strategies and Means

- Conducting food safety economics research to provide 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 to support education and outreach efforts and to improve understanding of the consumer benefits of various regulatory actions.
- Updating cost estimates of food borne illness to reflect the most recent data related to meat, poultry, and egg products.
- 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 improve the analysis of emerging, potentially high-risk threats to public food safety, animal health, and U.S. agriculture.

Management Initiatives

Overview

In July 2011, ERS launched an organization-wide strategic planning process to examine some of the difficult strategic tradeoffs facing ERS as an organization and develop a plan to address them. Additionally, this effort was designed to develop the Agency's capacity to proactively identify, evaluate, and make strategic choices that arise in the future. Specific project goals included the following:

1. Develop a framework for prioritizing work and allocating resources.
2. Identify opportunities for ERS to do its work better.
3. Identify ways to quantify ERS' impact.
4. Fully incorporate civil rights initiatives and activities into the ERS workplace.

Analysis of ERS Staff Resources

To assess strategic flexibility within the organization, ERS conducted a rigorous analysis of how staff resources are currently deployed. A set of "foundational elements" (i.e., data systems, information systems, or models that form the foundation for virtually all ERS' research and analysis) were identified and staff resources (expressed as full-time equivalent staff years/FTEs) were allocated against these elements. For each "foundational element," three types of staff resources were identified.

1. **Foundation data FTEs**—build, develop, and maintain the building block datasets and information systems used to conduct research.
2. **Foundation value-added FTEs**—conduct and produce research that helps shape or is very closely tied to a particular dataset, information system, or model.
3. **Strategically deployable FTEs**—engage in additional research in a broad area that is either exploratory in nature, an extension of the core research activities, or a mandated research project that would not have otherwise been completed.

Two primary findings emerged from this resource analysis. First, staff resources are fairly well distributed across the identified foundational elements. Those elements with a larger scope have more resources, while those with a smaller scope have fewer resources. Spreading staff across the elements confirmed that ERS expertise is not relegated to a small number of research areas, but instead spans numerous topics that affect food and agriculture.

Second, ERS' existing resources show more strategic flexibility than initially expected. Twenty percent of research staff was judged to be in the strategically deployable category, which is best able to respond to new and unforeseen topics. An additional 47 percent of research resources were categorized in the foundation value-added category, which has some degree of flexibility to add value to different foundational elements as needs arise.

Stakeholder Input

During its strategic planning process, ERS conducted 19 stakeholder interviews with a broad set of groups who could speak generally about food and agriculture and the role of ERS in addressing relevant economic issues in the field. These interviews produced many interesting findings that confirmed the ERS' research role, while also presenting opportunities for improvement.

Finding 1: ERS' greatest strengths are its research objectivity, quality, depth, and breadth.

Stakeholders are very complimentary of ERS' work and view it as a valuable resource for economic analysis of the food and agriculture sectors. ERS' most commonly noted strengths by stakeholders include the objectivity, quality, depth, and breadth of its work. ERS is seen as the authoritative source on a broad set of economic topics within food and agriculture. Many stakeholders suggested that, even where ERS has competitors doing similar research, they value ERS for its unbiased perspective. Stakeholders appreciate that ERS does not try to support an agenda with its research and, as a result, is viewed as a trusted source. Going forward, it is crucial for ERS to continue to preserve its objectivity.

The breadth and depth of ERS' work is also a critical strength and asset, and the Agency should continue to pursue a broad portfolio that covers all areas of interest for USDA. The depth of ERS' research is also highly valued, especially as many research organizations are moving away from work that requires longer-term investments. Because ERS is valued for its combination of long-term research, short-term analysis, and data, making tradeoffs across these three areas becomes even more difficult.

Finding 2: One of ERS' main competitive advantages is its access to USDA agencies, unique data resources, policymakers, and Government entities.

ERS' access to USDA agencies, rich data resources, policymakers, and Government entities is a significant competitive advantage. ERS is the only research organization of its kind positioned where food, rural, and agricultural policy is made and with access to key players making program and policy decisions. There also are huge opportunities for ERS to add value by contributing an economic perspective and connecting research on topics that stretch across various Government agencies beyond USDA.

Finding 3: Stakeholders highly value when context and interpretation is provided around data and research.

In addition to ERS data and analysis, the context and interpretation of its findings contribute significant added value to the work. At the same time, ERS must take caution to avoid interpretation that is not directly supported by the research or data. If ERS was seen as editorializing in any way, it would severely damage ERS' credibility and objectivity.

Finding 4: Stakeholders would like access to more short- and intermediate-term analysis and synthesis work from ERS.

Although breadth and depth of research were noted as significant strengths, stakeholders are always looking for more short- and intermediate-term analysis and synthesis work. ERS offers great depth within specific research areas, but could do more to present what it knows about the field more generally. Meta-analysis work done at the appropriate level and in ERS' objective and neutral manner could advance the dialogue around an issue without advocating a particular position.

Finding 5: ERS' products are not always easily consumable.

Stakeholders of all types noted that, although the quality of ERS' research is excellent, the delivery format could be improved. Ensuring that products are easy to find and that key points and takeaways are easy to identify could make ERS products more customer oriented. By better understanding stakeholders' information needs, ERS could create products better targeted to specific types of stakeholders and increase the usability of its information.

Finding 6: ERS can market itself more aggressively.

Stakeholders indicated that they generally can find the information they need from ERS when they need it, but also noted that ERS is not as proactive in marketing itself. Given ERS' strong brand, the current marketing approach has not yet hampered ERS significantly. However, in an increasingly crowded and fast-moving world of information, this approach may not suffice going forward.

Finding 7: ERS would benefit from more communication and collaboration with stakeholders and partner agencies.

Communicating and consulting with stakeholders early and throughout the research process could help ERS better understand stakeholder needs and expertise. Early consultation in the research process could provide input that might increase the usefulness of ERS research. Stakeholders also suggested that ERS would benefit from more project collaboration with other research groups/organizations, since ERS cannot cover every food and agriculture topic with the same level of depth and rigor. By partnering with others, ERS could effectively lend its expertise without expending the level of resources necessary to do the project alone. It is important to note that more communication and collaboration cannot come at the expense of the objectivity of ERS research.

2012-15 Management Initiatives

As a result of internal analysis and external stakeholder input, ERS has developed four management initiatives to maintain and enhance the objectivity, quality, depth, and breadth of the entire ERS research program. These initiatives will not interfere with the integrity of ERS research, but will build upon this hallmark.

Initiative I: Become more customer oriented.

ERS has an unparalleled reputation for being an objective and credible source for both short-term analysis and long-term, in-depth research. ERS customers are looking for timely, topical information that synthesizes analyses across a number of areas and provides interpretation and context for the data and analytical findings. By improving the relevance and timeliness of ERS' products and services, the Agency can deepen its relationships with its stakeholders and magnify its impact. ERS will benefit from being more customer oriented than it is today and can do so without jeopardizing its core values of research integrity, objectivity, and neutrality.

Augment capability for short- and intermediate-term work

To become more customer oriented, ERS will augment its capability for short- and intermediate-term analysis and research while preserving research quality and depth. ERS will more proactively assess the emerging needs of stakeholders and develop unsolicited synthesis pieces that address these needs. This type of work will require ERS to be more creative in its use of delivery channels to ensure that the work is both of high quality and timely.

Develop and deliver products better aligned with customer needs

ERS will also become more customer oriented through the types of products it develops and the way it delivers those products to customers. ERS presents its research in more accessible ways to broader audiences through its *Amber Waves* magazine and through its redesigned website, but stakeholders often want brief, to-the-point communications that highlight the key points for research findings.

For these reasons, ERS will reexamine its entire product suite to better meet the needs of its customers. ERS will conduct a thorough review to ensure that the product continues to meet its intended purpose. Multiple formats of research outputs may be necessary to best meet different audiences' needs. Targeting products more effectively will lead to improved use of support resources and heightened research impact.

Initiative II: Improve ERS' visibility.

ERS can only achieve its goal of producing high-quality economic research, analysis, and data that enable well-informed policy decisions if the decisionmakers and policymakers are aware of and support the Agency's work. Competitors and similar organizations are becoming increasingly sophisticated in how they target their information to opinion leaders and push information to stakeholders.

To raise ERS' visibility, ERS will expand and deepen its marketing capability to cover the full product lifecycle, rather than just supporting a product at the time of release. This implies that marketing begins at the point of research planning by identifying project outputs and how they will be used. With the support of the communications team, researchers and managers will identify from the project outset the market for the work, what products will be most relevant for the market, and how interest will be generated for the project's outputs.

Initiative III: Align performance management system with evolving strategic goals.

To achieve lasting change in any organization, new objectives must be supported with modifications to how employee behaviors are cultivated and rewarded. Although the prior two strategic initiatives do not represent a complete departure from the existing culture, achieving them will require a new mix of skills and activities from employees that will need to be reinforced if they are to take hold. Successfully contributing to the Agency's strategic goals and initiatives will be a recognized component of staff performance. ERS will ensure that it measures and rewards success both at the organizational and individual levels in ways that align with strategic goals and initiatives.

Develop a set of measures to assess ERS impact

The first step in aligning a performance management infrastructure to organizational goals is to agree upon what success looks like for the organization and to design metrics that assess that success. ERS' greatest contribution is supporting policy and program decisions related to food and agriculture. The metrics ERS develops must evaluate impact across all constituencies.

Once ERS has a robust set of metrics that assess impact across multiple domains, contributions to these metrics will be integrated within the Agency's larger performance management infrastructure. Metrics will be reviewed regularly and discussed by senior management to identify whether ERS is meeting its goals around impact. Analysis of performance metrics also will facilitate priority setting and research planning to ensure that the Agency is meeting the information needs of its customers.

Align individual performance management with strategic objectives and impact measures. Once the organization's measures of success have been established, these can be cascaded down to the individual employee level. Both the quality and impact of research should be rewarded, and researchers

should not be deterred from taking risks to produce research with high impact. Indicators of high performance that reinforce the strategic objectives of the Agency (e.g., timeliness of research, participation in briefings, writing accessibility, etc.) will also be explicitly rewarded.

Initiative IV: Create efficiencies in how ERS works.

ERS, like many Federal agencies and programs, faces very real budget pressures. At the same time, ERS strives to maintain the breadth of its content while also expanding its impact. Stakeholders have reinforced the need for ERS' mission to continue being broad because ERS is often the only entity doing long-term work in critical topic areas. However, the only way to achieve these ambitious goals in a world of constricting resources is to improve the Agency's operational efficiency.

Increase communication and collaboration with stakeholders and partner agencies

Increased communication and collaboration with stakeholders and partner agencies improves efficiency. Getting feedback from stakeholders at the inception of projects provides guidance to researchers on how to create impact and may prevent unnecessary work. Additionally, early involvement will make the review process more efficient as stakeholders already would be aware of the work rather than being exposed to it for the first time at the point of review. Of course, input from stakeholders and partner agencies should never come at the expense of ERS research integrity and objectivity.

Leverage partnerships and extramural funding to expand or complement ERS capabilities

Collaboration can expand and/or complement existing ERS capabilities without the need to hire new staff. From time to time, ERS may need to expand into certain research areas, but may not be able to do enough hiring to build a deep expertise in that area. In these cases, it makes sense for ERS either to collaborate on projects with other research organizations or strategically direct extramural funding to organizations that could do work on behalf of ERS. Strategic partnerships allow ERS to lend its expertise without having to vastly expand its footprint.

Civil Rights Initiatives

A fair and equitable culture requires dedication and participation from all parties. ERS has taken key steps through the department's Cultural Transformation Initiative, but maintaining that culture calls for sustained effort from all ERS employees. Removing barriers for advancement, eliminating all forms of discrimination, and cultivating the skills and talents of all employees are extremely important to ensuring that ERS is a respectful place to work. Most significantly, this culture cannot be achieved without simultaneously considering both the internal and external operations of ERS.

Ensure management accountability for civil rights responsibilities and actions within ERS.

The position of the Director of Civil Rights was filled in September 2011, after an extended vacancy. Since filling the position, ERS has developed a civil rights strategic plan, and all ERS employees now have a civil rights element in their annual performance plan, which increases accountability throughout the Agency. The Director of Civil Rights offers training to inform all ERS managers and employees of their civil rights responsibilities and plays a vital role as a point of contact for questions and inquiries from staff.

While substantial effort has been made to increase the visibility of civil rights issues at ERS, more can be done to bring civil rights to the forefront and ensure an appropriate level of accountability for all staff. Enhanced tracking and measuring of civil rights efforts and their impact will give an indication of whether resources are properly directed. More transparency and openness across the entire Agency

will make staff aware of Agency efforts and progress on civil rights, while also identifying ways staff can participate and contribute. Ultimately, regular communication at all levels about civil rights needs to be a consistent part of ERS operations.

Continue and improve recruitment and outreach efforts to increase awareness of ERS among underrepresented populations.

In addition to delivering research and analysis that has a positive impact on the equitable delivery of USDA programs and addresses the needs of minority and low-income populations, ERS will engage in recruitment and outreach efforts that provide underrepresented populations with employment and/or collaboration opportunities. Recruitment and outreach will be enhanced by maintaining some existing ERS programs and by undertaking some new initiatives.

ERS will develop an effective special emphasis program to oversee outreach to underrepresented groups. Collaboration with minority-serving institutions will be supported and encouraged whenever possible. Continued participation in professional conferences and career fairs can expose more underrepresented groups to the work of ERS and employment opportunities, while also providing information on the educational requirements for working at ERS to undergraduate and graduate students. Maintaining support for the ERS Distance Learning Program, which provides remote lectures from ERS researchers to students at minority-serving institutions, will expose students to ERS and increase their familiarity with food and agricultural policy issues. This program currently reaches historically black colleges and universities, Hispanic colleges and universities, and tribal colleges, but consideration will be given to expanding the program.

Keeping track of ERS recruitment and outreach efforts and outcomes is imperative to determining effectiveness. Similar to having a more targeted approach to the development and marketing of ERS publications, recruitment and outreach will have greater impact if resources are directed toward initiatives and programs with documented results. Monitoring what works and what does not can guide future decisions on how to structure ERS recruitment and outreach.

Increase the diversity of the ERS workforce.

Achieving a targeted recruitment and outreach program could translate into increased diversity within the ERS workforce through its effects on hiring. As USDA seeks to hire a workforce that resembles the composition of the U.S. population, ERS will be strategic in its approach to hiring talented and diverse individuals who can contribute to the ERS mission. When hiring for open positions, ERS will strive to build strong pools of both internal and external candidates. This effort necessitates targeted and position-specific recruitment of candidates with relevant advanced degrees from all backgrounds.

ERS will offer current employees opportunities for training and development that will give all staff the chance to advance. Understanding the competencies and skills necessary for each position will help ensure that staff is aware of the expectations and requirements for advancement.

Dedicate necessary resources and maintain an effective civil rights program at ERS.

ERS will continue to act in accordance with Federal Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) laws and policies and do whatever is necessary to remove any barriers or discrimination present in the workplace. EEO complaints will be handled with timely resolution and the use of alternative approaches. ERS has offered and will continue to offer training to all employees pertaining to USDA's EEO policies. Knowledge among managers, team leaders, and employees of these policies will raise awareness of the value and importance of cultural diversity within ERS, while also explicitly sharing the roles and responsibilities of all staff in the EEO complaint process.

Fully participate and support the USDA Cultural Transformation Initiative.

ERS seeks to contribute to the success of the USDA Cultural Transformation Initiative, which strives to make USDA an inclusive, high-performance organization. The goal of Cultural Transformation is to ensure that all employees are given equal opportunity and are empowered to reach their full potential. As a USDA Agency, ERS will continue to participate in this initiative by supporting activities related to leadership, employee development, talent management, recruitment and retention, and outreach. Most importantly, success for Cultural Transformation is not based entirely on the actions and commitment of senior management. ERS will ensure that all employees have a role in the initiative and are committed to its success.

Appendix A: Program Evaluations

ERS used several different external reviews to develop this strategic plan and set Agency priorities. These reviews are described in the table below.

Program Evaluations Used to Develop the Strategic Plan				
Goal	Evaluations/ analyses	Brief description	What was the effect?	Date completed
All goals	External review of the Food Economics Program	External expert review panels evaluate the effectiveness of the ERS program of economic research and analysis to enable more informed decisions on food and agricultural policy issues. These reviews are intended to provide a “big picture” assessment of ERS research programs. In each review, the external panels assess the relevance, quality, and performance of program plans, activities, and accomplishments.	Strengthen and focus research program on food, nutrition, and food safety issues.	2005
	External review of the Market and Trade Economics Program		Strengthen and focus research program on agricultural production, marketing, global food security, and trade issues.	2006
	External review of the Resource and Rural Economics Program		Strengthen and focus research program on natural resources, environmental and rural economics, and development issues.	2007
	External review of the Information Technology Services		Improve customer service and delivery of ERS research products and findings to external clients and stakeholders.	2008
	External review of ERS modeling practices		Improve, focus, and strengthen ERS capacity to provide empirical economic analyses of critical policy issues of interest to external clients and stakeholders.	2009
	External review of the National Food Purchase and Acquisition Survey (FoodAPS)		Provide technical guidance on the design of the survey; review the results of the 2011 survey field test; provide guidance for final survey design.	2011
	External review of the Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS)		Ensure that ARMS is collecting and reporting the most accurate financial statements possible.	2011

Appendix B: Cross-Cutting Programs

ERS' work often cuts across jurisdictional lines within USDA, with other Federal agencies, and with State, local, and private partners. This table lists the primary partnerships that will enable ERS to reach the outcomes in this strategic plan.

Cross-cutting Programs		
Goal	USDA primary agencies	External organizations
Goal 1	Rural Development, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Office of the Chief Economist	U.S. Census Bureau, Department of Labor, Bureau of Economic Analysis
Goal 2	Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, Office of the Chief Economist, Forest Service, Agricultural Research Service	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Goal 3	Farm Service Agency, Risk Management Agency, Agricultural Marketing Service, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Foreign Agriculture Service, Agricultural Research Service, National Institute for Food and Agriculture	U.S. Trade Representative's Office, International Trade Commission, U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Economic Analysis, U.S. State Department
Goal 4	Food and Nutrition Service, Food Safety and Inspection Service, Agricultural Research Service, National Institute for Food and Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services, Food and Drug Administration, Department of Homeland Security

Appendix C: Strategic Consultations

ERS stakeholders are its customers, partners, staff, cooperators, and contractors. The ultimate beneficiaries of ERS programs are the American people, whose well-being is improved by well informed public and private decisionmaking.

ERS has identified its customers to be policymakers and key institutions that routinely make or influence public policy and program decisions. ERS shapes its programs and products principally to serve these key decisionmakers: USDA and White House policy officials and program managers; the U.S. Congress; other Federal agencies; State and local government officials; and domestic and international commodity, environmental, agribusiness, consumer, and other groups interested in public policy issues.

ERS regularly consults with external groups, customers, policy experts, industry, and consumer groups about the effectiveness of ERS programs. While many of the consultations were not conducted expressly for this strategic plan, they have had a deep influence on the development of this strategic plan.

Strategic Consultations			
Goal	Date	Who/what	Purpose
All goals	Ongoing	USDA program agencies	Attempt to meet individually with each Under Secretary's office and the heads of agencies within the mission area, as well as with staff offices, to determine what issues they see looming on the horizon that could benefit from economic research.
	Ongoing	Stakeholders workshops and facilitated feedback sessions	Discuss results of recent Agency research, identify policy issues, explore questions for future research, sharpen the Agency's research focus to better anticipate future needs for public and private decisionmakers.
	Annually	Work planning process for each division	Identify high priority studies and prepare comprehensive annual work plans for each of the Agency's program divisions that reflect consultations with organized groups of stakeholders as well as direct consultations with other mission areas within USDA.
	Quarterly	National Agriculture, Research, Education, Economics, and Extension Advisory Board	Advise USDA and its land-grant university partners on research, extension, education, and economic policies, priorities, and on the effectiveness of those policies and priorities.
	Annually	USDA Agricultural Outlook Forum	Discuss developments in global agricultural markets and exchange information with customers.
	Annually	Food Assistance and Nutrition Programs Priority Setting Conference	To share research findings and solicit input on research priorities with clients and stakeholders.