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Outside Witness Testimony from John E. Courtney, PhD, Chief Executive Officer, American Society for Nutrition

The Honorable Andy Harris, Chair, and Sanford Bishop, Jr., Ranking Member
Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug
Administration, and Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Harris and Ranking Member Bishop,

The American Society for Nutrition (ASN) respectfully requests that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)/ National Institute of Food and Agriculture/ Agriculture and Food Research Initiative receive no less than \$500 million, and that the USDA/ Agricultural Research Service receive \$1.877 billion in fiscal year (FY) 2026. ASN has nearly 8,000 members working throughout academia, clinical practice, government, and industry, who conduct research to advance our knowledge and application of nutrition.

Agriculture and Food Research Initiative

The USDA has been the lead nutrition agency and the most important federal agency to influence U.S. policies on dietary intake and food patterns for years. Agricultural research is essential to address the ever-increasing demand for a healthy, affordable, nutritious and sustainable food supply. The Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) competitive grants program is charged with funding fundamental and applied research, extension, and education in support of our nation's interconnected food and agricultural systems, which includes human nutrition. AFRI has funded cutting-edge, nutrition research on key issues of timely importance on a competitive, peer-reviewed basis since its establishment in the 2008 Farm Bill.

ASN requests that AFRI be funded with no less than \$500 million in FY 2026. \$500 million would allow AFRI to support more competitive grants that ensure a safe, sustainable, nutritious, affordable, adequate food supply and bring AFRI closer to its fully authorized funding level of \$700 million/ year. This funding level for AFRI is needed to invest in crucial areas aimed at addressing our nation's most urgent and pressing food, agriculture, and public health challenges. AFRI-funded research supports nutrition and wellness across the food system, food safety and traceability, supply chain resiliency, and a thriving research workforce. Growing inflation and food insecurity have been felt throughout the food and agriculture sector. AFRI is uniquely suited to address many of these challenges through transdisciplinary research, which allows researchers across disciplines to examine issues in a systematic way rather than in silos. However, despite incremental increases in AFRI funding, roughly 70% of AFRI proposals that are deemed worthy by expert review panels are not funded, simply because of insufficient funding. Agricultural and food research funding at the USDA has unfortunately remained fairly flat over the last fifty years.

Funding AFRI at \$500 million in FY 2026 is critical to provide a safe and nutritious food supply for the world's population, to preserve the competitive position of U.S. agriculture in the global marketplace, and to provide jobs and revenue crucial to support the U.S. economy. Robust investment in USDA-supported research is also needed to attract, retain, and develop the next generation of scientists to advance innovations benefiting all Americans. In order to achieve those benefits, AFRI must be able to support agricultural research and coordinate opportunities to build off of these discoveries.

Agricultural Research Service

The Agricultural Research Service (ARS) ensures high-quality, safe food and other agricultural products; assesses the nutritional needs of Americans; sustains a competitive agricultural economy; enhances the natural resource base and the environment; and provides economic opportunities for rural citizens, communities, and society as a whole. ARS supports intramural and extramural research across four national program areas including Nutrition, Food Safety and Quality. The ARS Nutrition, Food Safety, and Quality National Program maintains a healthy and safe food supply while improving the economic viability and competitiveness of American agriculture. **ASN requests that ARS receive \$1.877 billion in FY 2026 for ARS salaries and expenses, which represents a five percent increase over the FY2025 level,** to ensure that ARS can respond to food safety and nutrition security concerns, new plant and animal pests and diseases, and weather-related and environmental stresses.

ARS's human nutrition research program includes six Human Nutrition Research Centers (HNRCs) across the nation that link producer and consumer interests and form the core for

building knowledge about food and nutrition. HNRCs conduct unparalleled human nutrition research on the role of food and dietary components in human health from conception to advanced old age, and they provide authoritative, peer-reviewed, science-based evidence that forms the basis of our federal nutrition policy and programs. HNRCs play an important role not only in generating knowledge, but also in translating it for stakeholders. Funding for ARS supports all of the USDA/ HNRCs and ensures that these research facilities have adequate funding to continue their unique mission of improving the health of Americans through cutting-edge food, nutrition and agricultural research.

Nutrition monitoring conducted by the USDA/ARS in partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is a unique and critically important surveillance function in which dietary intake, nutritional status, and health status are evaluated in a rigorous and standardized manner. ARS is responsible for food and nutrient databases and the “What We Eat in America” dietary survey, while HHS tracks nutritional status and health parameters. Nutrition monitoring findings are essential for multiple government agencies, as well as the public and private sector to track what Americans are eating, inform nutrition and dietary guidance policy, evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of nutrition assistance programs, and study nutrition-related disease outcomes. Because of past funding deficiencies, some food composition database entries do not reflect the realities of the current food supply, which may negatively impact programs and policies based on this information. It is imperative that ARS continue to receive increased support to update food and nutrient databases and to continue critical surveillance of the nation’s nutritional status and the many benefits it provides.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding FY 2026 appropriations for the U.S. Department of Agriculture/ National Institute of Food and Agriculture/ AFRI competitive grants program and Agricultural Research Service. Please contact Sarah Ohlhorst, MS, RD, ASN's Chief Science Policy Officer, if ASN may provide further assistance.

Sincerely,

John E. Courtney, PhD

Chief Executive Officer, American Society for Nutrition