Mounting Budget Cuts Will Compromise the Mission of The Agricultural Experiment Station

On Feb. 3, the governor’s office announced proposed midterm budget cuts that would result in an additional 5.75% reduction in the funds allocated to The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station (CAES) in fiscal year 2017.

Unfortunately, this is a double whammy for CAES as it was already hit with a significant reduction of almost half a million dollars in December 2015 in the form of budget holdbacks and rescissions.

If you add it all up, the reductions total approximately $934,000. This may be small change for some agencies but it’s a big deal for CAES. The reductions, by our calculations, represent an 11.5% cut to a small budget that’s already leaned out.

In the scheme of things, CAES’s $8.1 million budget (2016) is one of the smallest in the state. When I do the math, it comes out to 0.045%. That’s hundreds of a percent! Surely that small an amount can be found somewhere else that doesn’t have such a large impact on the quality of life in Connecticut.

We get it. Times are tough but these cuts are more than cosmetic, and more than cutting fat, they will do real damage and will have far-reaching and probably unforeseen consequences.

According to Dr. Theodore G. Andreadis, director of CAES, the cuts would result in the loss of as many as 10 scientific and technical staff members. “It would essentially ruin us,” said Andreadis, “We’d become a second-class institution.”

The proposed cuts would also cause a lot of collateral damage. Just dismissing some scientists, for example, could result in the loss of $500,000 in federal grants.

Ironically, CAES arguably represents the best return we get for our tax dollars here in Connecticut. Unfortunately, most people don’t know much about them.

Surprisingly, more than one-third of CAES’s budget doesn’t even come from state coffers because they’re partially funded by federal and industry grants.

They also have millions of dollars of high-tech equipment that’s been donated by the federal government to help them perform their mission. Talk about value added!

And who is going to operate all this high-tech equipment if we send the scientists packing? Is it just going to sit there collecting dust like a CDC lab in the Zombie Apocalypse?

We understand the need for belt-tightening but these decisions shouldn’t be made in a vacuum. Consequences, unintended and otherwise, need to be evaluated.

In 2011, The Experiment Station was targeted as one of only three state agencies slated for 100% elimination as part of Gov. Dannel Malloy’s original “Plan B” approach to the state budget.

This was one of the oddest notions ever to come out of Hartford. The Malloy administration was brand new at the time and, presumably, didn’t fully understand what CAES does. Maybe they still don’t.

The assumption, in 2011, appeared to be that many of CAES’s functions could be privatized. That’s not going to happen. These are scientists, not administrators or bureaucrats. Even more relevant, The Experiment Station is an integral part of a complex worldwide network of institutions and agencies. There will be far-reaching consequences if we disrupt their basic ability to function.

In 2011, once the administration got wind of how important CAES is to public health, food safety, and our agricultural and horticultural businesses, they backed down. (It no doubt helped that they were inundated with complaints from constituents.)

CAES, also sometimes called The Experiment Station or just The Ag Station, performs a number of core functions that are critical to life in the Nutmeg State.

For the sake of brevity, I feel like I should summarize CAES’s core functions but to do so would be a disservice to the agency and our readers. It is imperative that people know what they do.

**Regulatory Functions**
- Inspect nurseries for pests and plant disease
- Inspect apiaries and certify bee keepers
- Survey towns for destructive insect pests including the gypsy moth and emerald ash borer
- Conduct surveys for invasive insects
- Conduct state-wide surveillance for mosquitoes and mosquito-borne diseases including eastern equine encephalitis and West Nile virus (and, in 2016, the Zika virus).
- Analyze food products and fertilizers for other state agencies and the FDA

**Agricultural Research**
- Evaluate new specialty crops and cultivars in our “New Crops for Connecticut” program for emerging markets
- Study honey bee and native pollinator health
- Develop new management tools to control plant pathogens that attack nursery stock
- Conduct wine grape and hop cultivar trials for Connecticut industries
- Study plant disease mechanisms and model epidemics
- Evaluate methods to improve soil health with micronutrients, biochar and earthworms

**Environmental Research**
- Evaluate methods to manage and control algal blooms and invasive aquatic plants
- Develop cost-effective protocols to foster storm-resistant roadside forests
- Conduct surveys for new alien insects and evaluate biological control methods to limit the use of chemical insecticides
- Investigate soil microbial ecology
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and factors contributing to sudden vegetative dieback in coastal salt marshes
• Study the impact of environmental stresses in the urban forest to increase public safety, and reduce costs and risks for municipalities
• Develop methods to remediate organic pollutants in contaminated soil and water

Food Safety
• CAES is the only agency that tests food and beverages for pesticides and toxic heavy metals
• Provide analysis of samples submitted by all other state agencies
• USDA, FDA and the CT Dept. of Consumer Protection use CAES data for regulatory action
• Member of the US FDA Food Emergency Response Network (FERN) to respond to terrorist events involving the food supply (one of only 14 laboratories in the country)

Public Health
• Houses the Center for Vector Biology & Zoonotic Diseases and a Biosafety Level 3 Containment Facility certified by the CDC. (Required to handle agents like West Nile virus.)
• Conduct state-wide surveillance to monitor mosquito-borne viruses that cause human and animal disease
• Study the ecology of invasive exotic mosquitoes and epidemiology of mosquito-borne diseases
• Conduct integrated tick management studies to reduce the risk of tick-borne diseases
• Evaluate bed bugs detection and control devices
• Study the composition and impact of indoor airborne molds on human health

Public Service
• Plant Disease and Insect Diagnostic Offices: Provide diagnostic services for plant diseases and insect pests for homeowners, businesses and pest control professionals
• Tick Testing Program: Test ticks for three pathogens of human disease: Lyme disease, Babesiosis, and Anaplasmosis
• Seed Testing: Test vegetable, crop and lawn seed for compliance with federal seed law and truth in labeling. CAES is the official seed testing laboratory for the State of Connecticut
• Soil Testing: Test and analyze soil samples for fertility

A World-Class Research Facility That Benefits Connecticut
CAES is, at its core, a research facility that conducts research and disseminates scientific knowledge that benefits agriculture, horticulture, the environment, food safety, public health and our quality of life. James G. Horsfall, director of CAES from 1948-1971, said “The station was an invention for making inventions.”

A Brief Sample of CAES’s Accomplishments
• Work that led to the discovery of Vitamin A (1913)
• Developed double-crossed hybrid corn that revolutionized global agriculture (1919)
• Discovered the first organic fungicide (1940)
• Developed gas chromatique technique to detect pesticide residues on produce (1963)
• Isolated Lyme disease agent from Connecticut wildlife (1983)
• Developed antibody tests for laboratory diagnosis of Lyme disease (1984)
• First culture of West Nile virus in North America (1999)
• Selected to be part of the Food Emergency Response Network to help protect the nation’s food supply. (2005)
• Developed new methods for detecting oil-spill petroleum-related chemicals in seafood. (2010)

Getting Down to Business
CAES not only supports agriculture, they also serve the state’s horticultural, gardening and landscaping businesses.

According to Andreadis, the nursery/greenhouse trade, the largest agricultural industry in the state, represents $3 billion in economic output and supports more than 48,000 jobs.

According to the Connecticut Nursery & Landscape Association (CNLA), there are more than 1,700 companies operating in all of the state’s 169 municipalities.

History & Roots: An Unbroken Chain
The Experiment Station was the first of its kind in the nation and served as the model for the many that followed. Established in 1875, primarily through the efforts of Samuel W. Johnson, The Station was founded to “put science to work for society.” Johnson believed that agriculture could be advanced by scientific investigation performed in conjunction with practical experimentation.

Johnson was right and CAES has served Connecticut well for more than 140 years. It made it through the Great Depression and the Great Recession. It would be sad indeed to see it dismantled on our watch.

Crippling CAES would negatively impact commerce, exacerbate public health problems, and cause unanticipated collateral damage. In the final analysis, compromising the mission of The Experiment Station is a really bad idea for everyone concerned.
@GovMalloyOffice recently tweeted: “Budgeting more prudently can help us protect the services we value most.” We agree.

– Will Rowlands

WHAT YOU CAN DO
If you agree that gutting The Experiment Station is a bad idea for Connecticut, contact your local representatives and let your opinion be known. Contact information for members of the CT General Assembly’s Appropriations Committee can be found at www.cga.ct.gov/app
You can email Gov. Dannel Malloy at Governor.Malloy@CT.gov