



November 8, 2023

Federal, State, and Local Public Agencies  
Interested Parties  
Members of the Public

You are invited by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Research Service (ARS) to participate in the public comment and review process for the development of an Environmental Assessment (EA) addressing construction and operation of a new Dairy Forage Research Center (DFRC) in Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin.

The Draft EA evaluates construction of a new DFRC at S8046 U.S. Highway (USH) 12, approximately 2.3 miles northwest of the existing DFRC site at S8822 Sunset Drive, and approximately 4.6 miles northwest of the town of Prairie du Sac. The Proposed Action would construct multiple new dairy production, research, warehouse, and maintenance facilities, covered walkways, roadways, and fenced areas within the 101-acre project site. Approximately 61 acres of the project site would be disturbed during construction, resulting in approximately 22 acres of new facilities and pavements. Development actions associated with the project would be anticipated between 2024 and 2027.

**Why are we proposing to relocate the existing DFRC?** The purpose of the Proposed Action is to improve cow health and well-being, and to modernize and enhance the quality and quantity of research conducted on the forage production and the utilization of the forage by the dairy cow. Research would include investigating how dairy cows digest and utilize feed so that forage plants and dairy cattle diets can be modified to improve digestibility and nutrient utilization.

The Proposed Action is needed because the existing DFRC facilities are outdated (over 40 years old) in design and function (small buildings and low-throughput) for the larger sizes and weights of modern cows (which are about 25 percent taller and around 40 percent heavier than the cows in 1980). The proposed enhanced DFRC would provide larger, modernized facilities and infrastructure to support research studies. Additionally, the Proposed Action is needed to support research that creates greater economic sustainability for dairy producers (e.g., more milk produced per unit of feed fed) and environmental sustainability (e.g., less manure produced per unit of milk produced).

**What is an Environmental Assessment (EA)?** An EA is a concise public document that is prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. An EA evaluates a federal agency proposal and alternatives to help that agency determine the potential for environmental effects on resources, and whether those effects would be significant to warrant preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

Environmental issues addressed in the Draft EA include land use; geological resources; water resources – including wetlands and waterways; biological resources – including protected species and habitats; cultural resources; socioeconomics; environmental justice; infrastructure

and transportation; visual resources and aesthetics; air quality and climate; noise; public health and safety; recreation; hazardous materials and wastes; and a cumulative effects analysis that considers the compounding effects from implementing the Proposed Action as well as other projects planned in the vicinity over the same timeframe.

**What alternatives to the proposed DFRC will be assessed in the EA?** USDA considered two potential alternatives to constructing the new DFRC:

- Expanding and upgrading the existing DFRC on Sunset Drive, and
- Maintaining and making minor upgrades to the existing DFRC on Sunset Drive.

Both alternatives consisted of modifying the existing DFRC and would involve construction of approximately 220,000 square feet of new facilities. However, neither of these alternatives met the selection standards outlined by the USDA because both would require the expansion of the existing manure storage facility in an area adjacent to the Wisconsin River, limit the potential for future DFRC expansion, and would result in continued research within outdated buildings.

Accordingly, only the Proposed Action was carried forward for detailed analysis in the EA. In accordance with Council on Environmental Quality NEPA regulations, the EA also analyzes the No Action Alternative, which would be the decision to not implement the Proposed Action and continue operation in the existing facilities.

**How is the USDA ARS Coordinating with Other Agencies and the Public?** The USDA ARS has conducted consultation with the Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), other invited consulting parties, and federally recognized tribes per Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and Executive Order (EO) 13175, *Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments* to determine the potential for effects on historic and cultural resources. USDA also consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service per Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act regarding potential for effects on protected species.

Although the USDA ARS is responsible for the scope, content, and decisions made, notices of the availability of the Draft EA and requests for input have been provided to local, state, and federal stakeholders. Additionally, notification of the availability of the Draft EA is being published in the local newspaper to initiate the 30-day public review and comment period. All comments received will be considered in the development of the Final EA.

To enable public access to the Draft EA and Draft Finding of No Significant Impact (FNSI), hard copies can be provided to individuals, upon request to the USDA ARS using the email address provided, below. Please consider the environment when requesting hard copies. Electronic copies of the Draft EA and related materials are available online at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Digital Library website (<https://usace.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16021coll7/id/24933>).

**How can you participate in this process?** At this time, USDA ARS is requesting input from local, state, and federal agencies, Tribes, and the public to support identification of other project approaches and ensure resource concerns are considered. The goal is to make an informed decision using the best available information. To participate in the EA process, we encourage you to attend the informational public meeting being conducted by USDA on **Tuesday, November 28, 2023, at the George Culver Community Library (615 Phillips Blvd., Sauk City, WI 53583) from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.** We also encourage you to provide your comments on

the Draft and Draft FNSI by December 8, 2023. To help guide your comments, we'd like you to consider the following questions:

**Question 1. After reviewing the environmental issues examined in the EA, are there other resources or issues that you believe should be evaluated in the EA?**

**Question 2. Do you have any comments regarding the scope of the Proposed Action and the need to update and optimize the USDA ARS's ability to conduct ongoing dairy and forage research in support of the dairy industry?**

**Question 3. Do you have other comments about the scope of analysis of the EA, or relevant information that you would like to contribute to the analysis?**

Please provide your comments via email: [Stephanie.Frank@usda.gov](mailto:Stephanie.Frank@usda.gov)

To ensure the USDA ARS has sufficient time to consider your comments, please submit by **December 8, 2023**. All comments received will be part of the public record and will be reviewed prior to release of the Final EA and decision on whether to sign a FNSI. Requests for additional information on this project may be emailed to Stephanie Frank at [Stephanie.Frank@usda.gov](mailto:Stephanie.Frank@usda.gov) including DFRC EA in the subject line.

Based upon the analysis in the Draft EA, no significant impacts would be expected on any of the environmental resources identified in the proposed project area. The Final EA and FNSI are expected in Winter 2023.

Sincerely,



Stephanie Frank, PhD  
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