



American Federation  
of Government Employees

November 22, 2024

### **The Office of the Special Counsel**

### **Reference: Evidence, Findings, and Conclusions of the second USDA Report on the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC) by the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Local 3147**

First, we want to thank those who supported, guided, and encouraged us as we worked through the process of filing a complaint with the Office of Special Counsel. So many were integral in helping us successfully compile supporting documentation and work with the BARC Leadership team to take corrective steps so that the nation's largest agricultural research facility could continue to develop innovative solutions to maintain America's position as a world leader in the agricultural industry.

As the Whistleblowers, Union Representatives, and dedicated employees of BARC, we are encouraged and grateful for the progress ARS and BARC leaders have made thus far. The hiring of a new and highly competent Facilities Director has been the most impactful step in our opinion. Employees are seeing real improvements and not just empty promises. The new Facilities Director and the new BARC Director seem to make a very focused and effective team.

#### Some improvements employees are experiencing include:

- Long-standing repairs are being performed and in some cases completed:
  - Replacement of the entire roof on the Poultry Building (B. 329)
  - Fire Suppression Systems are back online after being down for several years
  - Dangerous steam lines have been capped and full repairs are scheduled
  - Potable water in most buildings is now operational
  - Increase in the number of Safety and Environmental staff
  - Some of the buildings that have been abandoned for years are finally slated for demolition
  - Proper equipment to conduct Confined Space training has been procured and the relevant employees are scheduled to begin this important safety training
  - Elevators that were not functioning for several years have been repaired. A few are still not fully operational, but the majority are now working

We still have several significant concerns in regards to BARC and hope to continue engaging with the Agency's leadership team to find some workable resolutions.

#### Some of our ongoing concerns include:

- Though we agree with the investigator's assessment that data and resources were not "irretrievable" after catastrophic events because of built-in redundancy, we are still concerned that the investigators placed little significance on delays in the research, costing the taxpayers money and hindering access to innovation.
- As the boots-on-the-ground for many of the things related to employee needs and concerns, the Union has been repeatedly denied the time to engage with employees in order to better glean how effective some of the solutions have been.
- On the surface, the ARS Leadership team appears to be "strengthening collaboration" with the Union and the Bargaining Unit Employees we represent. However:
  - Union representatives have not been included as active members of key Tiger Teams related to BARC. Of the ten (10) Tiger Teams addressing issues at BARC, on paper the Union is represented on four teams. To date, the Union has only been afforded the opportunity to participate in meetings for two of the ten Tiger Teams.
  - The Union has not been afforded the opportunity to obtain and provide regular and recurring feedback about whether these accomplishments are real and implemented to the extent the Agency Leadership has claimed.
- The ARS Leadership has not explicitly acknowledged the dedication and sacrifices made every day by BARC employees working under challenging conditions in order to perform vital work for our country and its citizens.
- The lack of ready access to the Occupational Medical Surveillance Program, or OMSP (an OSHA requirement) is still very troublesome. BARC employees have been denied this critical onsite service for more than four years. The Agency Leadership

has noted the reestablishment of the OMSP as a completed accomplishment, but it continues to be out of reach of most employees because of the difficulty in signing up (the associated paper is 13 pages long), scheduling an appointment at an offsite location, and coordinating with supervisors to attend appointments during their duty hours.

- The lack of accurate occupancy lists for each building is a safety concern and creates confusion and misinformation. Employees are frequently relocated to temporary space and the occupancy list is not updated to reflect their presence. This means they may not be aware of critical building outages, delayed services, or misdelivery of goods.

IN CONCLUSION:

We are supportive of the steps the Agency has taken thus far. The reviewing of the documentation associated with the progress and status of the items in the chart will take time and should be monitored on an ongoing basis. Many of the serious issues at BARC did not happen overnight and we are aware of the fact that they will take time to address. As Union Representatives, we can request specific documentation from the Agency on the many points in the charts contained in this latest iteration of the Department report, and follow up with the Agency with informal inquiries during our Labor-Management Relations Committee meetings and formal Information Requests.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

President, AFGE Local 3147

[REDACTED]

Vice President, AFGE Local 3147

[REDACTED]

Secretary, AFGE Local 3147

USDA, Agricultural Research Service  
Henry A. Wallace Beltsville Agricultural Research Center  
10300 Baltimore Ave, Building 426A, Cubicle #8, BARC-East  
Beltsville, MD 20705

