

UI Sets Sights on Ag Research Center
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MOSCOW - The chances that the University of Idaho could snag a well-funded research center from the University of Wyoming are actually pretty good, according to a representative for Idaho Rep. Walt Minnick.

Several other states are vying to become the new home for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Services' Arthropod-Borne Animal Diseases Research Laboratory, said Minnick spokesman John Foster in Meridian, Idaho.

But Minnick, a Democrat, sits on the House Agriculture Committee that oversees the USDA, and is a good friend of Minnesota Democrat Collin Peterson, the committee chairman.

"So (Minnick) will certainly have some influence," Foster said.

In a show of unity across party and state lines, Minnick joined with Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., and Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., in signing a letter to the USDA requesting the move.

Minnick started pursuing the lab after UI lobbyist Marty Peterson brought it to his attention earlier this year, Foster said. Peterson said the university has a facility available that could host the lab, which could reduce the cost of moving it from Wyoming.

"And they (the UI) see this as potentially being a centerpiece of an expansive agricultural research program," Foster said. "When they first explained it to us earlier this year, it was very clear very quickly that it would be a great benefit to the university if we could help them make it happen."

The Washington congresswomen signed on because of the UI's proximity to Washington State University, which would expand its research partnerships with the UI if the lab is moved to Idaho.

The lab conducts basic and applied research on several viral diseases in domestic animals. Arthropods are a group of invertebrate animals including insects like mosquitoes that transmit many diseases, such as West Nile virus.

The UI already works on similar research projects through its relationship with WSU's Animal Disease Research Unit, and has its own infectious disease research program, according to the letter.

The USDA considers the lab's current facilities in Laramie, Wyo., to be outdated, and has been looking at a move for several years, Foster said.