American Library Association
Association of Research Libraries

June 19, 2003

The Honorable Robert Bennett
Chairman, Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, and Related Agencies
Senate Appropriations Committee
SH-123 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510-6026

Dear Senator Bennett:

On behalf of the American Library Association (ALA) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), we write to request increased support from the Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, and Related Agencies for the National Agricultural Library (NAL). Our organizations support an increase of $10 million over the requested $24 million for fiscal year 2004. Funding for this critical national resource has remained flat at near $20 million each year since 1995, representing a 21% decline in appropriation levels.

Together, ALA and ARL represent thousands of individuals and institutions serving communities across the United States. ALA is a nonprofit educational organization of 64,000 school, public, and academic librarians; library trustees; and other friends of libraries dedicated to improving library services and promoting a free and open information society. ARL is an association of 124 research libraries in North America. ARL programs and services promote equitable access to and effective use of recorded knowledge in support of teaching, research, scholarship, preservation, and community service.

NAL’s information resources are essential to the nation’s ability to sustain a viable agricultural economy. NAL’s Agricultural Information Centers provide services throughout the U.S. to agribusiness and citizens in key areas such as food and nutrition, alternative farming techniques, animal welfare, water quality, invasive species, and rural technology transfer. NAL resources support efforts to maintain a safe, abundant, and affordable food supply as well as a healthy environment. Parents and care-givers and anyone who depends upon the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for nutrition and food safety information needs access quickly and easily.

NAL’s collection contains more than 3.5 million items in more than 70 languages and a variety of formats covering all areas of agriculture and related sciences, and NAL is, by far, the largest agricultural library in the world. Its legislative mandate is to serve as the United States’ primary agricultural information resource. NAL’s collections, programs, and services support the USDA as well as scientists, researchers, policymakers, teachers, and students. In addition, NAL
provides the public with crucial information on food safety, nutrition, and biological hazards, and provides needed agricultural extension services.

Because of shrinking funding over the past eight years, NAL has been unable to fully implement its mission to support the USDA and the American public. A Blue Ribbon Panel studied the Library’s programs and services in 2001 and strongly recommended upgrading NAL’s information service infrastructure and enhancing staff expertise. With an increase in funding NAL could take better advantage of new digital technology that would greatly enhance services. While NAL has developed critical on-line information services such as AGRICOLA (Agricultural On-line Access), DigiTop (Digital Desktop Library for USDA), and AgNIC (Agriculture Network Information Center) with limited funds, there is a pressing need to redesign and upgrade the national agricultural information system to fully meet the needs of farmers, scientists, students, researchers and others who use these invaluable resources.

We all face new security risks in these uncertain times. The availability of accurate, reliable, and current information is key to successful responses to threats of bio-terrorism. NAL can provide authoritative biological information to address these potential threats. However, increased funding is essential for NAL to make this information available to those charged with protecting our communities.

In conclusion, we ask you to support this valuable national resource. NAL needs a strong infusion of funds to enable the Library to upgrade service capability and add to the nation’s valuable agricultural information resources. A modest but significant investment will benefit farmers, scholars, families, and the general public.

Sincerely,

Lynne Bradley
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