June 1, 2004

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

Dear Chairman Bennett,

On behalf of the American Library Association (ALA) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), we are writing in support of the FY 2005 funding request of $23.3 million for the National Agricultural Library (NAL). We greatly appreciate your past generosity to NAL and ask for your support of an additional $2 million from NAL’s FY 2004 appropriation of $21.3 million.

Since 1862, NAL has sought to increase the availability and utilization of agricultural information for researchers, educators, policymakers, consumers of agricultural products, and the public. NAL is the nation’s largest and most accessible agricultural research library and plays a vital role in supporting research, education, and agriculture.

For FY 2005, we are requesting your support for a nine percent increase in funding for NAL for it to effectively serve as the Nation’s premier provider of agricultural information. The majority of this additional funding request, $1.25 million, would be used for a revitalization process of NAL, and more specifically to develop and deliver content for a National Digital Library for Agriculture (NDLA). Establishing NDLA is critical for NAL to ensure that information will continue to be readily and conveniently available to the agricultural community and the public in this ever-growing digital era. The additional resources will enable NAL to integrate existing Web information resources from NAL information centers and special emphasis programs with NAL’s
rapidly expanding bibliographic database, AGRICOLA, and Web-based resources from Agricultural Information Network (AgNic) alliance members. Fully integrated access and seamless navigation among diverse information content resources is essential for NAL to meet the increasingly complex interdisciplinary information needs of American agricultural consumer communities. Increased appropriations levels will also allow NAL to develop the necessary collaborative partnerships with selected university research libraries offering strong programs in the agricultural and related sciences. These programs are vital to building the network infrastructure necessary for the development of NDLA.

NAL knows that maintenance and preservation of electronic resources is key to guaranteeing their access and quality in the future, therefore $600,000 of the proposed $2 million increase would go to ensuring long-term access to the NDLA. In the first year of this project, NAL would research and implement preservation technology infrastructure conducive to preserving and providing access to the non-digital publications in the NAL collection through digital reformatting of 15,000 core document images for public Web-access. NAL would also collaborate with AgNIC libraries to further develop and implement a national program for preserving digital agricultural information through a pilot project with three Land Grant University Libraries.

AGRICOLA is comprised of more than four million records and is the primary resource for agricultural information. It has been available free of charge via the NAL website since 1998 and has served as an invaluable tool in keeping members of the agricultural community connected and informed. NAL would dedicate $150,000 of the additional funding to integrate the AGRICOLA database into NDLA. Specifically, the funding would go toward implementing mechanisms to digitally link current AGRICOLA records for core agricultural resources to corresponding digital objects including text, images, and data that yield an increase of 10 percent annually.

We appreciate how difficult it can be for Congress to provide increases in budgets, but due to the 10-year flat funding of $20 million, NAL has been limited in its capabilities, programs, collections and services. The marginal funding increases have inhibited NAL from taking full advantage of digital technology for service improvements; disallowed NAL from hiring new staff; and prevented current staff from working on new collections and program initiatives.

In 2001, NAL’s programs and services were analyzed by a “Blue Ribbon Panel,” which reported that NAL requires increased support to take advantage of technological innovations for timely information access and retrieval. The National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board assessed the Panel’s report in 2002. In considering the Panel’s recommendations, together with additional public comments from NAL’s broad user communities, the Advisory Board recommended to the Secretary of Agriculture that “...a revitalized NAL must have a major infusion of new resources if it is to meet its potential.” The Board further recommended “...that an immediate increase of $10 million is needed to launch the revitalization process.”

U.S. research libraries and members of the agricultural community depend on NAL for effective access to agricultural and related information. For example, NAL acquires,
preserves, and manages information and services in all phases of agricultural and related sciences; organizes agricultural information by cataloging, indexing, and making it readily available to the public, including USDA and research libraries; coordinates with library community on related agricultural research and education; and cooperates with public and private agricultural industries and programs to develop a comprehensive information network. Thus, NAL provides essential services and infrastructure for organizations, higher education institutions, libraries, researchers, and members of the agricultural community.

ARL and ALA strongly urge you to continue to support this valuable national resource. NAL’s information, services, and programs are vital to the success of the agricultural community.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of NAL’s FY 2005 funding request.

Sincerely,

Duane E. Webster
Executive Director
Association of Research Libraries

Emily Sheketoff
Executive Director
ALA Washington Office

ARL is a not-for-profit membership organization representing the leading research libraries in North America. Its mission is to influence forces affecting the future of research libraries in the process of scholarly communication. ARL’s programs and services promote equitable access to and effective use of recorded knowledge in support of teaching, research, scholarship, and community service.

The American Library Association is the oldest and largest library association in the world, with more than 64,000 members. Its mission is to promote the highest quality library and information services and public access to information. ALA offers professional services and publications to members and nonmembers, including online news stories from American Libraries and analysis of crucial issues.