



Plan to move USDA jobs, possibly to Georgia, pits Perdue against ally

By Tamar Hallerman, J. Scott Trubey, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* – May 1, 2019



Republican U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue, left, and Democratic U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop of Albany have long been allies in a relationship that dates to 1991, when they both entered the Georgia Senate. But they are currently at odds over Perdue's plan to relocate the headquarters of two research divisions of his department, possibly in Athens or Griffin.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue wants to relocate the headquarters of two research divisions of his department out of Washington, and two Georgia communities — Athens and Griffin — are among the many competing for the prize.

Leaders in dozens of states covet the headquarters of the Economic Research Service and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture for their 600-plus high-paying jobs and expected spinoff investments from vendors. Some observers think, because Perdue was governor of Georgia, the two Peach State cities have an inside track against the 66 other locations still in contention.

But standing in the way is U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop, D-Albany, one of Perdue's longtime allies who holds a key post in the new Democratic-controlled House.

The political friction threatens to throw a kink into Georgia's pitch as Perdue angles for a decision this summer.

In his 26 years on Capitol Hill, Bishop has honed a reputation for steering federal dollars to his poor, largely rural southwest Georgia district. But Bishop panned Perdue's proposal to move the agencies out of Washington, calling it "a bad idea" that would harm morale and potentially hamper the agencies' objectivity.

And Bishop hasn't shied from wielding his position as chairman of a powerful House subcommittee to try to block the move using Congress' power of the purse.

"It does not make any sense and it seems to be a solution in search of a problem," Bishop told Perdue at a recent budget hearing.

Perdue says shifting the bulk of the agencies' employees out of Washington will help cut costs and bolster the department's relationship with farmers. Even though he's made overtures to Bishop in recent months, Perdue suggested he could circumvent Congress entirely.

"Congressman Bishop ... is one of the ones we want to satisfy," Perdue said during a recent stop at a USDA facility in Newnan. "We've been trying to be very patient with his people. If you've got questions, please let us address them and we'll tell you the why, what, when, how that we've proceeded in this."

The spat has created an awkward public rift between two powerful Georgians whose friendship dates to their days as Democrats entering the state Senate together in 1991. It's also put Bishop at odds with other members of Georgia's congressional delegation, many of whom support relocating the agencies.

State economic development officials, meanwhile, find themselves in a bind. They view Bishop as a friend in Washington, and they need his support for other issues such as Hurricane Michael relief. But they also desperately want the new headquarters and quietly hope the dust settles.

Bert Brantley, the chief operating officer for the state Department of Economic Development and an aide to Perdue when he was governor, steered clear of the political controversy. Instead,

Brantley touted the potential for spinoff jobs and the chance to attract companies wanting to serve the USDA.

He pointed to the U.S. Army Cyber Command, scheduled to relocate from Maryland to Fort Gordon near Augusta next year and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as two federal headquarters — albeit on larger scales — that have become a boon to their communities.

“We are hopeful that all of our delegation and political leaders see the benefit of a project like this coming to Georgia,” Brantley said of the USDA facilities. “We completely understand and respect everyone’s differing perspective.”

‘No hard data’

Bishop holds immense power over Perdue as chairman of the House Appropriations subcommittee that writes spending bills for the Department of Agriculture. The two are chummy and have generally been in sync on major policy issues.

Over the past two years, Perdue has put his stamp on the USDA, taking the first steps to reorganize several chunks of a massive bureaucracy and the 100,000-person department he oversees. Still, his announcement in August about wanting to move the ERS and NIFA — which conduct and fund agricultural research — reportedly caught many of his own staff members off guard.

Cutting costs and moving researchers closer to the field, Perdue said, “will help us fulfill our informal motto to ‘Do right and feed everyone.’ ”

The move infuriated Democrats on the House Appropriations Committee, who said they were blindsided and didn’t receive a cost-benefit analysis from the USDA.

In a swipe at Perdue, Bishop called it “ironic” that the proposed move of two research agencies had “no hard data supporting it.”

A top Perdue adviser testified that analysis will be released closer to when the USDA picks the winning city. The search, which started with 136 expressions of interest from 35 states, was recently narrowed to 68 cities, including Athens and Griffin. Another cut is pending.

Both of Georgia’s candidates rely heavily on the University of Georgia, a land-grant university and agricultural powerhouse. Airport access is a critical need outlined by the USDA, and both sites are within about an hour of Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, depending on traffic.

Brantley, the Georgia economic development official, said Griffin and Athens check all the boxes of the USDA’s criteria, including low costs for operations and living, easier commutes than the D.C. metro area and high quality of life.

For Bishop, “it’s not a question of parochial interest,” he told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Quality of life

Republican members of Georgia’s delegation largely support the state’s bids.

“We believe relocating ERS and NIFA would build upon USDA’s capacity and improve the agency’s ability to recruit top talent from universities across the nation while being closer to rural America and reducing taxpayer expenditures,” 32 GOP House members, including U.S. Reps. Austin Scott of Tifton and Rick Allen of Evans, wrote in March.

Bishop’s four Georgia Democratic colleagues, meanwhile, are publicly sidestepping the fight.

Scientific groups including the American Statistical Association, the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges and the Union of Concerned Scientists, support Bishop. They fear a relocation would undermine the quality of the agencies’ work.

“If it’s such a good idea and (Perdue) has some real reasons, why wouldn’t he share them and build a coalition of people that support it?” said Gale Buchanan, a former USDA official and onetime dean of UGA’s College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences who opposes the relocation. “Getting Congress on board, to me, would be a step in the right direction.”

Bishop tried to block the move earlier this year in a must-pass spending bill, though the provision was eventually watered down.

The USDA hired the consulting firm Ernst & Young to evaluate sites, and Perdue said he’s committed to conducting “a very transparent and professional” search.

Though Perdue said he’s willing to work with Congress, he said he’d take unilateral action if necessary.

“I do believe I have the legal authority to do this (within the powers of) the executive branch,” Perdue said, “but I would love to do it with Congress’ blessings.”

The USDA’s internal watchdog is currently reviewing whether that is indeed the case and if Perdue followed proper relocation procedures.

In a recent hearing, Bishop said Perdue’s plan would hurt morale in agencies already battered by staff departures and proposals for deep budget cuts. Keeping ERS and NIFA staff near other federal research agencies, he said, would help them meet their mission.

John Boyd, a site selection consultant in New Jersey, called government agency relocations “the next frontier of headquarters attraction.”

Modern communications and air travel lessen the need for government to be centrally located, Boyd said.

Many real estate interests want the federal government to move some functions out of the Washington area because office space is so expensive. Amazon recently selected a site in Northern Virginia for its second headquarters, a move that's only going to make office space and talent even pricier, Boyd said.

The sprawling USDA could be a prime candidate for other relocations. It's also something that could draw support from Republicans and rural Democrats, Boyd said.

For his part, Bishop said the tiff hasn't harmed his relationship with Perdue. The two recently appeared together at an event at Fort Valley State University.

"Reasonable minds can disagree," he said.

As for whether Perdue has the authority to circumvent Congress, the longtime appropriator was more tart.

"Well, maybe he does," Bishop said, "but he has to have money to spend to do it."