

September 12, 2025

The Honorable Brooke L. Rollins
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Re: Comments on the Proposed Relocation of the U. S. National Fungus and Nematode Collections

Dear Secretary Rollins,

The Natural Science Collections Alliance is a non-profit association that supports natural science collections, their human resources, the institutions that house them, and their research activities for the benefit of science and society. Our membership consists of institutions that are part of an international network of museums, botanical gardens, herbaria, universities, and other institutions that contain natural science collections and use them in research, exhibitions, academic and informal science education, and outreach activities. We write to express concern about the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) reorganization plan, outlined in the 24 July 2025 Secretary Memorandum (SM 1078-015), which calls for closing the Henry A. Wallace Beltsville Agricultural Research Center—home to the U. S. National Fungus Collection and the USDA Nematode Collection.

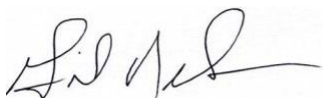
The U.S. National Fungus Collection, which is part of the Mycology and Nematology Genetic Diversity and Biology Laboratory, holds nearly one million specimens of fungi, making this among the two largest such repositories in the world. Founded in 1869, this collection holds preserved specimens of more than 65,000 species. For nearly 150 years, American and foreign scientists have used this collection as a reference for the identification of fungi that are eaten by humans and animals, that cause disease in crops, and that play a key role in nutrient recycling in terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. This collection holds more than 25,000 specimens that are the basis of the names of fungi, many of which are of importance to the U. S. economy. Scientists consult this collection in order to determine the correct name to use for fungi that are encountered in nature and in agricultural and industrial settings. Accurate and consistent scientific nomenclature ensures effective communication among scientists throughout the globe and assure the validity, reliability, repeatability, and value of research results. Consultation of this collection may take the form of a visit to the facility, or the loan of specimens made to the researcher's own laboratory. Preserved specimens not only maintain critical structural features of fungi but also can be used for DNA extraction. Comparison of gene sequences derived from DNA not only help confirm the identity of fungi but also provide insight into their evolution, including how species become pathogenic.

The USDA Nematode Collection is one of the world's most significant scientific resources for understanding nematodes, tiny organisms that affect plants, livestock, and ecosystems. Housing more than 49,200 permanent slides and vials, with a total repository of nematode specimens reaching several million, the collection functions as a permanent repository for type specimens and serves as a vital reference for scientists in the U.S. and abroad. Beyond preserving physical specimens, the collection archives critical information on host associations, geographic distributions, disease impacts, and genomic sequences, making it a cornerstone of agricultural and environmental research. Equally essential are the curators who maintain the collection. These experts not only safeguard the specimens but also serve as living libraries of knowledge, with deep familiarity in nematode taxonomy, pathology, and ecology. Their expertise helps farmers, researchers, and policymakers respond effectively to the billions of dollars in crop and livestock losses caused annually by parasitic nematodes. In today's era of genomic and environmental DNA research, having accessible, verified voucher specimens is critical for validating genetic results.

These collections make the United States a world leader in scientific research that safeguards the future of American and global agriculture. It is critical for research and education on fungi and nematodes as well as for diagnosing related diseases that this facility remains the critical source of information that it has been throughout most of the history of the United States. The new location for the National Fungus and Nematode Collections must have climatic conditions that meet established standards for long-term preservation of specimens. Such conditions include appropriate temperature, humidity and lighting, as well as sufficient space to avoid overcrowding. Preserved specimens require continual monitoring for insect pests that can destroy collections. Sufficient staffing levels must be maintained to conduct this monitoring, and to fulfill requests for specimens and data from researchers. It is also critical that the new facility for the National Fungus Collection be accessible to visiting scientists and students, with space for the examination of specimens.

USDA has a duty to farmers, livestock-raisers, and the American public to oversee all aspects of the national food supply and the factors that affect it. This responsibility includes supporting these vital collections and the research expertise required to maintain and expand them. We are confident that the excellent current staff of the U.S. National Fungus and Nematode Collections can advise you on the needs of the collections moving forward. At the same time, the Natural Science Collection Alliance stands ready to provide any additional expertise you may require as you develop plans for their relocation and long-term care.

Sincerely,



Gil Nelson, Ph.D.

Natural Science Collections Alliance President