



American Society of Agronomy • Crop Science Society of America • Soil Science Society of America

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October 26, 2020

The Honorable Chad F. Wolf
Acting Secretary of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

Re: DHS Docket No. ICEB-2019-0006

Dear Acting Secretary Wolf:

The American Society of Agronomy (ASA), Crop Science Society of America (CSSA) and Soil Science Society of America (SSSA), collectively representing more than 8,000 scientists and students, are concerned by the proposed rule titled “Establishing a Fixed Time Period of Admission and an Extension of Stay Procedure for Nonimmigrant Academic Students, Exchange Visitors, and Representatives of Foreign Information Media.”

Replacing the current “duration of status” periods of admission for individuals granted student visas (F visas) and exchange (J visas) with an inflexible fixed period of stay will cause undue hardship for international students. The proposed rule, if implemented, will harm our ability to attract the world’s best and brightest to study here.

We acknowledge that in some disciplines and types of graduate programs students can achieve the MS or Ph.D. degree in the time period proposed. However, in the life sciences, graduate degree programs typically exceed the proposed fixed time periods. It takes on average nearly six years to complete a PhD, not only for foreign but also for U.S. students. According to the National Science Foundation Survey of Earned Doctorates, a life science doctorate takes nearly seven years if the international graduate student is completing a combined master’s degree and PhD. The proposed rule prevents international graduate students from knowing that they will have enough time in the United States to complete an agronomy, crop, or soil science Ph.D.

Universities have specific set timelines for graduate students to complete their coursework to ensure students graduate within a reasonable amount of time. The existing academic timelines provide graduate programming guidance for all faculty and students and provides a framework for managing international graduate students. We see no benefit to adding new timelines that are arbitrary and do not recognize the actual duration of current graduate programs culminating in degree completion. Further, it is unclear how this rule will specifically address the proposed rule’s referenced risk to national security that current procedures pose.

International students are major contributors to the research enterprise and America’s unparalleled innovation economy. The notice of proposed rulemaking even cites a recent Association of International Educator analysis which finds that “international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities contributed \$41 billion and supported 458,290 jobs to the U.S. economy during the 2018-2019 academic

year.” The Federal Register notice also recognizes the potential for international students to choose another country over the United States and that this decreased demand could lead to reduced enrollment, “impacting school programs in terms of forgone tuition and other fees, jobs in communities surrounding schools, and the U.S. economy.” Creating disincentives for international students to study in the U.S. will damage our ability to attract and retain top-tier talent, and ultimately harm the U.S. economy.

Under the proposed rule, international students pursuing degrees in the life sciences will likely be subjected to the bureaucratic uncertainty and stress of requesting an extension of stay as they embark upon critical stages of their graduate research projects. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) estimates the current processing time for extension of status (EOS) requests range from five to ten months for students. Such a wide range in wait-times suggests international students may be unable to receive a timely EOS, resulting in significant impacts to research progression and degree completion.

We recommend that DHS work closely with institutions to ensure international students are graduating within the existing institutional graduate program progression and timelines. We believe that DHS already has adequate regulatory and procedural guidelines in place to manage international student graduate education without imposing new rules that ignore the realities of graduate studies in the life sciences and appear to us to be arbitrary and capricious.

We urge you to withdraw this proposed rule.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Goeser', written in a cursive style.

Nicholas J. Goeser, CEO
American Society of Agronomy
Crop Science Society of America
Soil Science Society of America