Rutgers centers face cut in funds

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BRIDGETON — In early February, a star-studded array of local politicians and community leaders attended a check-presentation ceremony for the Rutgers Food Innovation Center.

One by one, officials stepped to the podium to tout the virtues of a planned $8.8 million business incubator facility, intended to offer support to farmers and small food companies under one spacious roof in Bridgeton.

More than a month later, Rutgers officials are fretting for the future of that center and others like it — thanks to President Bush's proposed budget for fiscal year 2006.

The budget would phase out by fiscal year 2007 base funding that supports the infrastructure of Rutgers' research and extension stations in the state.

President Bush's budget proposal would cut funding for some area research projects.

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Center in Bridgeton and a shellfish laboratory with facilities in Cumberland and Cape May counties.

A news release from Rutgers warns that Cook College and the NIAES, stripped of its base funding, "would be forced to lay off approximately 75 staff members and would likely hire fewer faculty over time, thus having a negative impact on teaching programs."

The NIAES receives base funding through the federal Hatch Act, the McIntire-Stennis Act and the Animal Health and Disease program. All three of those funding sources would be phased out entirely within two years, the university said.

USDA spokesman Ed Loyd said the federal funds were not being eliminated so much as reallocated.

He said the government was shifting from a formula funding of land grant universities to a "competitive, peer-reviewed" process. He described the change as part of an "administration-wide effort of getting to a performance-based budget."

The White House budget calls for funding from the National Research Initiative to increase to $250 million. The White House also proposes establishing a $75 million research grant program geared toward "regional, state and local priorities."

"The concern from the land grants is that they're going to have to compete for the dollars," Loyd said.

But Cooper said a lengthy competitive grant process would undermine a key purpose of the extension stations, which is to be able to respond quickly to health and science emergencies. He described the infestation of the Asian longhorn beetle as one such example.

Eric Powell, director of the Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory, called the proposed federal budget a "disaster" for his center. Among other duties, the laboratory studies breeding and genetics, conducts a stock assessment for oysters in New Jersey and establishes allowable harvesting levels.

"You can't take any more money out of this program," Powell said. "It's not fair — not without shutting things down."

Some research stations would be affected more than others, with newer ones such as the Food Innovation Center — especially vulnerable, Cooper said.

The Food Innovation Center, designed to help farmers and smaller companies get their products to the market and provide them with access to research and technology support, could face a "severe cutback in staff" and is in a "very critical phase for building."

"What we're trying to do is we're trying to make people aware so that they can either contact their representative or their senator to say, 'Hey, they really do a good job with the area,' Cooper said.

At least one federal lawmaker in New Jersey has been made aware of the situation.

U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo, R-2nd, who attended last month's check-presentation ceremony, released a statement through a spokesman Friday pledging to "fight for more funds for the Food Innovation Center in Bridgeton and other agricultural research programs that are important to southern New Jersey and the Second District."