Improvements in mechanization, agricultural practices, and cultivars led to an increase in agricultural production that resulted in the late 1920s, in crop surpluses and a decline in farm prices. Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace reported in the 1934 Yearbook of Agriculture: “Science has magnificently enabled mankind to conquer the problem of producing enough to go around. It has now to help us utilize the increased productivity.”

In 1935, in order to address science and agricultural production, Senator John Bankhead and Congressman John Jones introduced a law directing the Secretary of Agriculture to: “conduct research into laws and principles underlying basic problems of agriculture in its broadest aspects; research relating to the improvement of the quality of, and the development of new and improved methods of production of, distribution of, and new and extended uses and markets for, agricultural commodities and byproducts and manufactures thereof.”

As a result, Secretary Wallace established a National Research Center in Beltsville, Maryland and nine regional research laboratories throughout the country. In order to further develop farm policy, President Franklin D. Roosevelt held a conference in 1937 of farm leaders and Congress. The result of this conference was a law directing the Secretary of Agriculture to: “establish, equip, and maintain four regional research laboratories, one in each major farm producing area, and, at such laboratories, to conduct researches into and to develop new scientific, chemical, and technical uses and new and extended markets and outlets for farm commodities and products and byproducts thereof.”

These four laboratories were called Utilization Centers to avoid confusion with the nine Regional Research Laboratories. The Utilization Centers, with state of the art research facilities, are located in Wyndmoor, Pennsylvania; Peoria, Illinois; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Albany, California. A unique feature of the Centers are their Pilot Plants where USDA scientists can collaborate with industry to commercially scale-up their laboratory research.