Ensuring an abundant and safe food supply. Finding alternative fuel sources. Curbing the obesity epidemic in America. These are the types of problems that Chavonda Jacobs-Young ’89, ’92 MS, ’98 PhD confronts every day. And from her perch in one of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s main research divisions, she is well situated to help some of the nation’s best scientists work for solutions.

Jacobs-Young oversees funding for government research and studies as the associate administrator for national programs for the USDA’s Agricultural Research Service in Washington, D.C. It’s a career that she never anticipated when she graduated with a degree in Pulp and Paper Science and Technology from NC State, but one she says has been extraordinarily gratifying.

“What I like the most is the public service element in what I do,” says Jacobs-Young, who was the first African-American to earn a doctorate in paper science and engineering in the United States. “It’s exciting to know that the recommendations I make could make a significant impact on programs and policy.”

Her career path has taken an unconventional route compared to many in her field, who often go into academic or corporate research positions. Jacobs-Young started as a professor at the University of Washington in Seattle, but always wondered “what those guys in D.C. do.” In 2002 she began working for the USDA and eventually became acting director of the National Institute of Food & Agriculture, a branch of the USDA that funds research grants. During her tenure, one of NIFA’s grantees identified genes in wheat that control the plant’s ability to withstand freezing temperatures, which could help breeders produce plants with a greater resistance to cold.

“By 2050, the world’s population is expected to be nine billion,” says Jacobs-Young, who left NIFA to join ARS in May. “We have to find ways to feed and clothe those people without destroying the environment.”

Being a trailblazer—as an African-American and a woman in a male-dominated field—was never a part of her plan, but it’s a responsibility Jacobs-Young welcomes. “There’s a pressure to give 150 percent and always bring my A-game,” she says.

She says she believes that’s especially important when she talks with young people: “I don’t know who the scientists of the future will be. But it’s so important to articulate what the opportunities are so the people behind me can shape the direction of the future.”

—Diana Smith

Inside the Beltway: Making sure USDA’s science is sound.