

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 30, 2017

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20006

Dear President Trump,

We write today to raise concerns about your budget request to cut Farm Bill programs by \$23.1 billion and to dramatically reduce or eliminate rural development programs within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). These proposed cuts, combined with USDA's reorganization plan, which would abolish the Under Secretary of Rural Development at USDA, would have significant negative impacts on rural America.

Small towns and rural communities embody many of our nation's greatest strengths, and the people of these communities deserve every opportunity to raise their families with well-paying jobs and a high quality of life. Our small towns and rural communities, however, experience unique challenges in developing and maintaining infrastructure and providing high-quality health services and education. Understanding and responding to these unique challenges to help these communities create jobs and drive economic growth is the principal mission of USDA Rural Development.

Unfortunately, the fiscal year 2018 budget proposes drastic cuts to USDA Rural Development that undermine its ability to serve rural America. Although we are deeply concerned with many other aspects of the USDA budget, the focus of this letter is limited to USDA's rural development mission. These reductions would undermine the ability of local communities to support rural home ownership; provide clean drinking and waste water systems; and promote access to critical services such as rural hospitals, police, and firefighters. If enacted, these cuts would have a damaging impact on rural communities throughout the country.

For example, zeroing out the USDA funding for water and wastewater infrastructure projects leaves small communities without access to the federal funds needed to address the \$2.5 billion backlog for clean and reliable drinking water systems, sanitary sewage waste disposal, and emergency water assistance. Eliminating USDA's small business programs leaves businesses with less access to capital, educational opportunities, entrepreneurial training, and technical support. These programs have been credited with saving almost 800,000 jobs and have helped finance more than 107,000 businesses since 2009. And finally, the budget proposal jeopardizes critical rural broadband health service grants that provide communities with additional tools to help provide access to education and rural health care, including battling the opioid epidemic. Simply put, cuts to these programs hinder the ability of rural America to see economic growth and development.

These cuts, coupled with the recently announced USDA reorganization, deepens our concern that the decisions made by this Administration will harm small towns and rural America. While we applaud the establishment of an Under Secretary for Trade as required by the 2014 Farm Bill, we are concerned with the planned elimination of the Under Secretary of Rural Development. USDA officials have made it clear that there is no legal requirement to eliminate any of the Under Secretary positions at USDA in order to create an Under Secretary for Trade. Both agricultural trade and rural development functions at USDA deserve and require high-level, accountable, and singularly focused leadership to ensure their missions success. We do not believe that enhancing agricultural exports has to come with a demotion for the rural development activities.

Additionally, we are disappointed that USDA plans to implement the reorganization even before public comments are due, suggesting that USDA has no real plan to consider these comments and make any changes based on the comments. USDA must carefully consider all comments received before the proposed reorganization is actually implemented.

We will continue to fight for rural America by rejecting these budget cuts, and we ask that you reconsider USDA's plan and maintain the Under Secretary for Rural Development. We believe that if we can work together, we can find a better way to respond to the unique needs of America's small towns and rural communities.

We look forward to working with you and your Administration on these critical issues.

Sincerely,

Debbie Stabenow
Sumed Brown

Joe Donnelly
Heidi Heitkamp

Amy Klobuchar

Patty Murray

Bob Casey, Jr.

Mike F. Ben

Kirsten Gillibrand

Catherine Cortez Masto

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Doug C. Peterson

Al Franken

Jon Tester

Debbie Stabenow

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Tammy Duckworth

Ben Rayburn

Chris Coons

Chris Van Hollen

Angus King

Bob Sanders

Patrick Leahy

Ron Wyden

Jeffrey A. Merkley

Cc: The Honorable Mick Mulvaney
The Honorable Sonny Perdue

Chuck Sch

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