USDA

United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

OCT 18 2005

The Honorable Saxby Chambliss
Chairman
Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee
United States Senate
SR-328-A
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Last month, Secretary Johanns announced the opening of a dialogue with state and congressional leaders to discuss how best to modernize the Farm Service Agency (FSA) county office system to ensure that it meets the needs of farmers and ranchers in the 21st Century. Our hope is to agree on a process to wisely invest in our employees, technology and equipment. We must ensure that our farmers and ranchers continue to receive excellent service long into the future.

The ultimate goal of this process is to improve the effectiveness of FSA offices by upgrading equipment, investing in technology and providing personnel with critical training. No further net reductions in personnel are anticipated, to the extent funding permits.

We recognize that opposition has developed to this comprehensive process of state-by-state review of analytical information, including workload assessments for each office, location of offices in proximity to one another, farm lending volume and density of agricultural activity. We do appreciate the concerns that you and other Members of Congress have raised. We thus are prepared to set aside the "FSA Tomorrow" approach and timetable but do believe that continued dialogue and comprehensive review are still necessary.

Today, FSA has 2,351 county offices across the country. More than 400 of these offices have two or fewer full-time staff. Nearly 500 offices are within 20 miles of the next nearest office. There are over 30 offices with no full-time employees, over 110 with only 1 full-time farm program employee, and over 340 with only 2 farm program employees. There are 1,076 offices with 3 or fewer employees. We clearly need to address how we can best continue to provide farmers with efficient services given such a structure and the costs of maintaining it.

We do need your leadership and support as well as that of your committee to reach agreement on a process that is comprehensive, includes all stakeholders (local officials, farm and commodity groups, USDA employees, and congressional delegations), and ensures that the needs of farmers

and ranchers in the 21st Century are secured. We would like to develop consensus on a process that will provide modernization of the county office structure over the next couple of years that results in improved cost effectiveness and enhanced program delivery. Properly equipped, better-trained, fully staffed offices will provide superior services to farmers and ranchers.

A primary focus of the "FSA Tomorrow" effort was to reinvest the savings from the rightsizing and modernization effort in updated information technology that is sorely needed in FSA offices nationwide. FSA's computer system and database predate the Internet and are unable to effectively communicate with web-based systems. And, it is increasingly difficult to find cost effective hardware and technical support for the outdated equipment. FSA needs more powerful and modern information technology (IT) systems and software in order to respond more quickly and with greater flexibility to expected workloads and unanticipated workloads created by weather related situations such as crop disasters.

Mr. Chairman, while we have set aside this effort, we need your assistance and support to modernize the county office structure to make the IT investment necessary to continue to effectively serve our farmers and ranchers well into the 21st century.

Sincerely,

J.B. Penn
Under Secretary
Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services