

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

April 11, 2014

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We wish to express our concerns with the USDA's plan to close or consolidate 250 Farm Service Agency offices as part of the President's 2015 budget. As you are well aware, local FSA offices provide much-needed technical support to farmers and landowners. This support is particularly critical in rural communities, where farmers often have limited access to other assistance. As the USDA continues to explore office closures, we ask that you consider the disproportionate and potentially damaging effects that these closures could have in rural areas.

We recognize that past efforts by the USDA to close or consolidate FSA offices – which targeted offices that were within 20 miles of another FSA office or had two or fewer permanent full time employees – were based on statutory direction from Congress. However, we believe the USDA's interpretation and implementation of the statute was flawed in several ways. First, it used air mileage rather than road mileage to calculate the 20 mile radius. Second, it applied the standard of two or fewer employees even when that number was simply a result of retirements or unfilled vacancies. Finally, it failed to consider that many rural FSA offices are already collocated or work interdependently with Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offices, soil and water conservation districts, and other service providers.

Therefore, as USDA continues to implement the 2014 Farm Bill and develop its "Model Service Center" plan for delivering assistance more efficiently, we respectfully request that you use road mileage to calculate the nearest FSA office, review the full workload of each office rather than the number of employees there at an arbitrary time, and encourage office collocation.

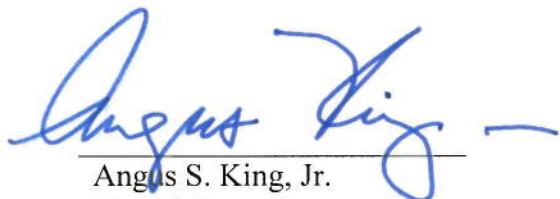
Rather than close rural offices, we believe your agency should promote increased collocation of the FSA, NRCS, soil and water conservation districts, and other farm services such as Cooperative Extension to establish "one-stop" USDA farm business centers. We were pleased to hear your support for this model during your testimony in front of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies. This "one stop" approach would increase efficiency, improve communication between agency and local government partners, and enhance service delivery to rural communities. Collocation can help reduce USDA's overall footprint without completely removing your presence from some rural communities. We also suggest that you employ your powers as Secretary to issue guidance encouraging the use of donated office space, on a full-time or part-time basis, from local governments and other appropriate entities.

While we applaud the USDA for its work to update and improve its information technology (IT) services, these advances cannot and should not replace the personal and interactive guidance provided by local FSA staff. In many states, the emergence of new, young, second-career and immigrant farmers means that the people who need the most information and assistance are the people who have little or no experience navigating the USDA system of programs and opportunities. We must also emphasize that no matter how efficiently you modernize your IT systems, those improvements won't help farmers and landowners who don't have access to the internet. Though rural broadband services continue to expand, many people still do not have internet access and rely on their local FSA office for information and support.

As your agency continues to develop its plan for "Model Service Centers," the review process must be transparent and inclusive so that the public can weigh in, and so that rural communities are not blindsided by potential office closures. Holding listening sessions after closure decisions have already been made does not qualify as an open process. USDA must actively solicit input from farmers and local officials that will be affected by any closures, and take steps to educate the public so they can truly participate throughout the process.

We strongly urge you to protect local communities by resisting rural FSA office closures. Please consider the benefits of office colocation, the need to use road mileage rather than air mileage, the full workload of each office, the limitations of purely electronic services, and the importance of ensuring an open public review process. We look forward to working with you on this important issue for our states.

Sincerely,



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator



Dave Loebsack
Member of Congress



Susan Collins
United States Senator



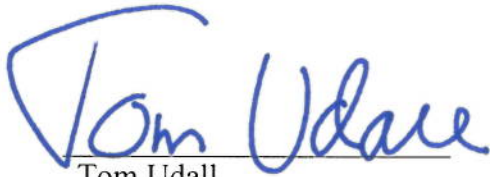
Walter B. Jones
Member of Congress



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



William L. Enyart
Member of Congress



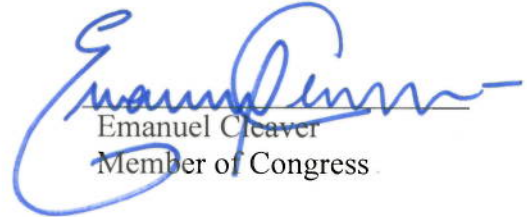
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Member of Congress



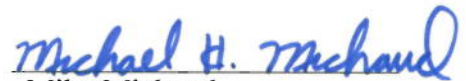
Tim Johnson
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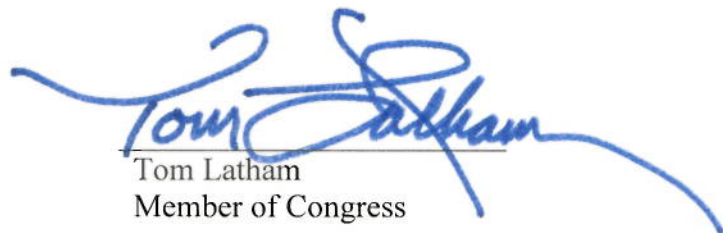
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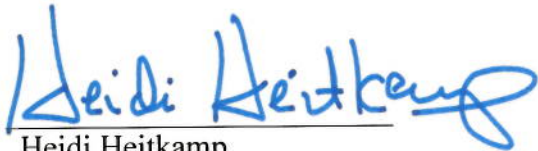
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