June 9, 2017

The Honorable Sonny Perdue

Secretary

U.S. Department of Agriculture

1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.

Washington, DC  20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

We write today in response to the notification received on May 11 regarding the proposed reorganization of multiple mission areas at USDA and to provide comments on such proposal.

            While we strongly support the creation of an Under Secretary for Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs, which was a requirement of the 2014 Farm Bill, we have serious reservations regarding the elimination of the Under Secretary for Rural Development.

While we appreciate your comments that rural development is a personal priority of yours, given the magnitude of these responsibilities, it is essential that the Senate retain its oversight obligations to review and confirm any nominee that would serve as the leader of the Rural Development mission area.  We also believe it is prudent for this leader to be able to focus solely on Rural Development and not also be charged with running the rest of USDA.

            Coupled with the current budget proposal, which, although developed prior to your confirmation, cuts the USDA Rural Development programs by 30 percent, completely eliminates more than 40 programs, and cuts staffing by nearly 20 percent, USDA’s plan to eliminate a Senate-confirmed Under Secretary to lead this mission area is very concerning.

            We believe that it is important to send the right signal to rural America regarding our commitment to the families who live there.  In order to do that, and to effectively manage taxpayer dollars, we must have an experienced leader at the helm who is focused on managing and delivering these important programs.  In FY17 over $39 billion is provided for new loan and grant obligations in Rural Development.  At the same time, over $218 billion in loans are currently outstanding, requiring constant vigilant servicing to maintain credit quality and guard against loan losses.  Most of this existing portfolio will require servicing for many years into the future.  If Rural Development were a private bank it would be one of the largest banks in the U.S.

              While we have received many communications from stakeholders, interest groups and concerned citizens asking that we oppose the elimination of the Rural Development Under Secretary, we have not received one statement in support.

For these reasons we cannot agree with this component of your reorganization proposal and respectfully request that you maintain a Senate confirmed Under Secretary for Rural Development.

Additionally, we have questions about the proposal to move the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) under a new Farm Production and Conservation Under Secretary. While we certainly support the goal of streamlining delivery of USDA programs, it is critical this move not diminish the important work NRCS does to protect our land and water. Further, we have questions about whether this move will diminish the longstanding cooperation between the NRCS and the Forest Service, and the positive results of that cooperation.  We request that, prior to implementation of any reorganization regarding NRCS, you send us additional information on specific measures USDA will take to ensure the mission of NRCS and its work in collaboration with the Forest Service is maintained.

We look forward to working with you on behalf of America’s farmers and rural communities.