

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

November 15, 2017

The Honorable Sonny Perdue  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We write to urge you to lift the current hiring freeze and restore staff field-based positions at the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Services Agency (FSA), so the agencies can operate at full capacity. These agencies are past the point of being able to do more with less and are now having to do less with less. The NRCS provides invaluable face-to-face technical assistance and administrative support to America's farmers, ranchers and foresters to implement conservation funding, or as you have termed it, "customer service". The FSA staff are critical to delivering disaster programs, as well as providing the day-to-day technical assistance and administrative support for America's strong farm safety net through the administration of farm commodity programs.

The current hiring freeze has been in place since January 22, 2017. But even before that, many states had accumulated a number of vacant field-based staff positions. As of the last reported count, there were 1,446<sup>1</sup> vacancies at NRCS and equivalent reported numbers at FSA. With continued retirements, those numbers have likely increased. The Customer Service is not there, particularly when providing fellow community members the technical assistance, reimbursement, or assessment needed to keep New Mexican's farmers and ranchers producing the food and fuel that powers this nation. This is not by any fault of the employees, who are often working nights, weekends, and on some accounts twice their paid hours. The customers, New Mexican's farmers and ranchers, are not receiving the tools they need to implement these critical programs.

You have acknowledged the need for improved customer service in your recent public appearances,<sup>2</sup> including when you spoke at the June 13, 2017 Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee hearing on the FY18 budget.<sup>3</sup> During that hearing, you provided your commitment to look into this issue and to assure the front line would not be hit by cuts. You noted that many existing NRCS and FSA offices only have one or two people, which can leave the offices woefully understaffed if one is sick and the other is out in the field. But the situation is even more dire. For example, the city of Carlsbad, New Mexico has been without any NRCS staff for nearly a year, leaving one of the most protective farm regions in the state unserved. Without these positions

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.obpa.usda.gov/27nrcsexnotes2018.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2017/09/07/secretary-perdue-announces-usda-improvements-customer-service>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/hearings/hearing-to-review-the-fy2018-usda-budget-request>

filled, the NRCS is unable to provide this customer service, which is harming our farmers, ranchers, and rural communities. In addition, by leaving these positions unfilled you are neglecting your promise to provide the necessary "customer service."

We are calling on you to lift your hiring freeze to ensure adequate NRCS and FSA staff are in place to support our farming and rural communities, which are vital in providing America's ability to produce food, fuel, and basic commodities. These staff positions provide critical support and service to rural American landowners, protect our valuable soil and water resources, and invest in rural economies. Your timeliness on addressing the NRCS' and FSA's field staff vacancies is crucial to ensuring our farming and rural economies receive necessary face-to-face technical support.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Tom Udall  
United States Senator



Martin Heinrich  
United States Senator



Michelle Lujan Grisham  
United States Representative



Ben Ray Luján  
United States Representative