



May 15, 2017

The Honorable Pat Roberts  
United States Senate  
328A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Michael Conaway  
United States House of Representatives  
1301 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow  
United States Senate  
328A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Collin Peterson  
United States House of Representatives  
1301 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Roberts, Chairman Conaway, Ranking Member Stabenow and Ranking Member Peterson:

The Campaign for Renewed Rural Development is a diverse collection of national organizations supporting a vibrant rural America through direct local investments, public education and federal advocacy. Today, the coalition stands united in support of the families and businesses in rural communities by opposing the elimination of the Office of Under Secretary for Rural Development within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

On Thursday, May 11, the Trump Administration significantly repositioned the Office of Rural Development (RD) within USDA, when Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue announced the creation of a newly-minted Trade Under Secretary and the replacement of the Under Secretary for Rural Development with a Special Assistant.

As production agriculture is important to both the local and global economy, we applaud the administration for supporting agricultural trade. For rural communities to prosper, however, rural families, businesses and cooperatives need strong, healthy communities with efficient transportation infrastructure, high-speed broadband, affordable housing and water, quality schools and public safety. We support and encourage the efforts to strengthen agricultural trade, but our underserved rural communities also need a robust RD program to be competitive in the national and global market.

While USDA has a broad mission to promote and support our country's food and agriculture, Rural Development is the only part of USDA that has the explicit directive to support rural communities. Rural America should not have to choose between production agriculture and critical economic development investments. Rural America needs core services and programs aimed directly at addressing the unique and diverse needs of rural communities.

The Department's reorganization is the result of a congressional directive included in the 2014 Farm Bill, which instructed USDA to create a new Undersecretary of Trade. Although Congress directed USDA to create a Trade Under Secretary, USDA was under no legal obligation to eliminate any other mission area or Undersecretary to accomplish the directive. According to the Office of General Counsel, the Secretary has authority to establish any number of Under Secretaries at will under a 1953 law, an authority that was explicitly retained by Congress in the 1994 Reorganization Act.

The Administration highlights the shift as an “elevation of rural development” as the new assistant would report directly to the Secretary of Agriculture. Yet all Under Secretaries already report directly to the Secretary, and indeed serve as part of his subcabinet.

In its current position as a core USDA Mission Area overseen by an Under Secretary, RD is part of the USDA subcabinet; the reassignment would remove it from the subcabinet and rescind the decision-making power that comes with being a core USDA Mission Area.

Additionally, Under Secretaries are confirmed by the U.S. Senate and held directly accountable to Congress for their office, scope and mission – special assistants are not. RD has a \$216 billion portfolio with over forty different programs. These programs provide critical resources and technical assistance for some of the most underserved communities in the country – a responsibility demanding the highest caliber of leadership and accountability. Demoting RD and removing Congressional accountability will have a direct impact on our nation’s ability to care for the underserved and compete in a global market.

With approximately 5,000 employees and 400 offices, and funding streams and subsidy rates more complicated than any other area of USDA, the RD mission area requires a dedicated leadership cadre focused exclusively on ensuring the programs are delivered and serviced most effectively. Dropping the administration of these vast programs on to the laps of typically overburdened advisors in the Secretary’s office increases the chances of mismanagement and waste.

Unfortunately, this reorganization is only one part of a series of events causing concern among rural stakeholders. It is difficult to decouple the proposed elimination of the Under Secretary for Rural Development with the Administration’s recent budget proposal that eliminates rural utilities and business programs. President Trump’s “skinny budget” proposal to Congress included the elimination of the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, the entire portfolio of Rural Business Cooperative Service programs and the Rural Water Wastewater Program.

These programs help make critical investments in our nation’s workforce and infrastructure. Many rural communities have not shared in the economic recovery and this is hardly the moment to downgrade the office and programs that are essential to improving the quality of life in rural America. Rural America depends on a strong federal partner to help make essential investments in critical infrastructure and economic development efforts.

The undersigned organizations call on Congress to protect these critical programs and prevent any attempts to eliminate the Rural Development Mission Area and the Office of the Undersecretary for Rural Development.

Sincerely,

Center for Rural Affairs  
Council for Affordable and Rural Housing  
Environmental and Energy Study Institute  
Fair Food Network  
Housing Assistance Council  
National Association of Counties  
National Association of Development Organizations

National Association of Towns and Townships  
National Cooperative Business Association CLUSA  
National Farmers Union  
National Rural Water Association  
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition  
Rural Community Assistance Corporation  
Rural Community Assistance Partnership, Inc.  
State Agriculture and Rural Leaders