

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1803

March 13, 2012

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

I wrote you on February 9, 2012, regarding the St. Mary Parish Farm Services Agency (FSA) facility, a matter of high priority to me and the people of South Louisiana. To date, my concerns and direct questions regarding the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) misreading of the law, mistaken assumptions, and factual errors have been ignored. As such, I am requesting that your department address the following points in writing within the next five calendar days.

As you are aware, the USDA has recommended closing the St. Mary Parish FSA and several other offices around the country in an effort to trim its budget. I fully support the USDA in its budget cutting efforts, while continuing to provide the level of service that our agriculture industry needs in order to survive. However, repeated requests by my office, for specific information have been ignored. As such, I haven't seen any evidence that the taxpayer or USDA saves one dime. In fact, contrary to cost savings, this closure will increase cost, rather than save money. The local producers, as taxpayers themselves, understand the financial dilemma that both USDA and the federal government are in, and have agreed to support cuts that actually make sense. Again, this one does not. Until the decision is either reversed or someone can prove to us that it does meet this cost savings criteria, we will not be silent.

Specifically, you responded to me on February 22, 2012, stating that USDA is simply following the guidelines Congress set forth in Section 14212 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-246). This Section states that, "to the maximum extent practicable, USDA must first consider for closure offices with two or fewer employees that are located within 20 miles of another office." Your FSA Administrator Bruce Nelson, repeatedly told me that Congress forced USDA to close offices, based upon the previous citation. After reading this citation, I disagree.

The statute, as I read it, requires that USDA look at closing FSA facilities that are less than 20 miles from the next nearest FSA before closing those that are more than 20 miles and have two or fewer employees. Nowhere in the referenced section of law is the Department mandated to close any offices. The statute simply sets out guidelines for any possible closures, thus giving your office a tool to use in cost savings at your discretion. As such, I want to know why USDA continues to insist upon closing the St. Mary Parish FSA.

Ignoring for a moment that no cost savings are being realized, the facts still do not support closure as the St. Mary Parish FSA is outside of the 20-mile guideline. Therefore, the office does not fit the statutory criteria for closure.

My staff has repeatedly presented separate maps proving this fact to Administrator Nelson. To date, the USDA has presented no data to refute this point. Moreover, in the above referenced correspondence, you state, "the Lafayette County [sic] office is 8 miles from the St. Mary County [sic] office." This statement is factually false, as the Lafayette Parish FSA and St. Mary Parish FSA are approximately 39 (air) miles apart. Thus it is impossible for the Lafayette Parish FSA and the St. Mary Parish FSA to be eight miles apart. This blatant inaccuracy shows either a distinct lack of familiarity with Louisiana or an inability to correctly read a map. As such, I again ask USDA to show me how the St. Mary Parish FSA is less than 20 miles away from another parish FSA.

Lastly, I requested that the department send all information concerning this closure to my office. I have yet to receive anything to date.

We are all aware of the fiscal environment that exists today. We must take a hard look at all of government to find ways to do more with less. I applaud your efforts to try to find cost cutting measures; however, we cannot cut costs at the expense of the service we provide to the American public. The St. Mary Parish FSA comes at no cost to the taxpayer and is a USDA success story. Again, please reconsider its closure.

Respectfully,



Jeff Landry
Member of Congress