

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 9, 2014

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Thank you for your continued leadership as the Department of Agriculture works to increase efficiency while delivering world-class service and value to our agricultural producers. While we support these efforts, we write today to express our serious concerns about the devastating impact that further closures of Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices in New Hampshire could have on our constituents.

Granite Staters appreciate and rely on the services provided by USDA staff at the various program offices throughout the state, including FSA. These services are an important part of what is helping sustain and grow New Hampshire's proud tradition of small family farms. In fact, USDA's most recent Census of Agriculture unveiled that while farms have declined four percent nationally over the past five years, New Hampshire's small and diverse farms actually grew by five percent over the same period. Now more than ever, our farmers and foresters need the services of programs like those FSA offers.

It is important to recognize that New Hampshire has already made great efforts to consolidate program offices, reduce budgets, and use its resources efficiently. Over the past twenty years, the New Hampshire FSA has eliminated individual county offices and co-located all of its remaining offices with other programs such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Rural Development, Conservation Districts, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and even the Chief Information Officer. These co-located offices have allowed FSA to deliver the same services to the agricultural community while realizing significant cost savings.

Although some of our New Hampshire offices may have only one FSA staff member, that person is trained to be competent in a multitude of services. FSA staff members have a very effective collaboration with their co-located counterparts from complementary agencies to meet the varying needs of our agricultural community. In addition to the practical benefit that this "one stop shop" format provides to farmers, these collaborations have also delivered savings through shared expenses for telecommunications, utilities, leases, and similar hard costs. The closure of any additional FSA offices in New Hampshire would reduce the services available to farmers while providing negligible, if any, cost savings.

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As your department embarks upon an analysis of the FSA offices across the country, we hope that you will consider these past efforts to increase efficiency, as well as the unique nature of agriculture in New Hampshire. The needs of farmers in New Hampshire are very different from those of farmers who operate the large single-crop farms found in much of the middle and western parts of our nation. New Hampshire farmers may utilize a different set of FSA programs, but they are no less vital to the success of our growing agricultural sector. Some of these important programs include emergency programs, the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program, and loans to beginner, woman, and socially disadvantaged farmers. We hope your analysis will give weight to the needs of our growing agricultural sector when considering these and other programs utilized in New Hampshire.

Farmers all across the Granite State tell us about the exemplary services provided by FSA offices in New Hampshire, which is a credit to the dedication of FSA's State Director and his staff. The closure of any one of our remaining FSA offices would greatly diminish this level of service and cripple FSA's ability to support New Hampshire's growing farmer population. Farmers would need to travel more than an hour to an office, only to find a reduced level of service. Furthermore, many farmers in New Hampshire do not have reliable access to internet or skills to conduct business online, inhibiting the use of digital support as a substitute to in-person meetings.

When conducting your work-study analysis over the next year, we ask that you consider the unique and critical value that the New Hampshire FSA offices provide to our growing population of farmers. Granite Staters need FSA to continue to provide its services in order to maintain the current growth of our agricultural sector.

We appreciate your consideration of this request, and we stand ready to work with you as you embark upon this analysis.

Sincerely,



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Kelly A. Ayotte
United States Senator



Carol Shea-Porter
Member of Congress



Ann McLane Kuster
Member of Congress