

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

April 16, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We write to express concerns about the disproportionate impact that the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is having on rural America. As you know, rural areas already face unique challenges, including with respect to access to broadband coverage, health care, and economic opportunity, and the COVID-19 pandemic will further strain limited resources as it continues its spread outside urban centers. It is for this reason we urge you to establish a “Rural COVID-19 Task Force” to help identify rural needs and tailor the allocation of resources to address them.

The COVID-19 pandemic affects every American no matter where they live, but its gradual spread to rural areas has led many to misjudge both its severity and rural America’s capacity to deal with it. As of April 6, at least one confirmed case of coronavirus has been confirmed in more than two-thirds of rural counties, and one in ten of these counties have reported at least one death.^[1] The virus has reached rural areas and it has now become clear that they are less equipped to handle the consequences.

People living in rural America are more likely to be uninsured, advanced in age, and have pre-existing medical conditions. Rural hospitals and health systems often have fewer ICU beds and resources to handle an increased demand on our health care infrastructure during a pandemic. One in five Americans living in rural areas are people of color, who have been disproportionately affected by the current crisis. Rural parents and students struggle to work or attend school remotely without reliable internet access. Agricultural producers and processors have less cash flow due to price declines, lack of market opportunities, and an already stretched workforce being squeezed by positive COVID-19 tests.

These challenges require Congress and the Department of Agriculture to take immediate action. That means – first and foremost – listening to rural leaders and citizens about the challenges they face, allowing them a forum to raise the issues that they have identified as being the most pressing. Second, it means providing administrative flexibilities and resources to address those challenges. And lastly, it means making certain that the resources provided are being distributed in an equitable way to meet rural needs.

We believe that these goals can be advanced by the Department of Agriculture establishing a Rural COVID-19 Task Force consisting of a diverse group of experts and representatives from all sectors of rural areas, including agriculture, health care including mental health, and the

^[1] <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/08/us/coronavirus-rural-america-cases.html>

private sector. The Rural COVID-19 Task Force would help to identify rural challenges, develop strategies and policy recommendations, assemble a guide of available Federal programs and resources, consult with the Department and Congressional Committees, and provide oversight on the distribution of funding.

The only way to beat this pandemic is to fight the virus together, and that means making sure that no person or community is left behind and that they all have the resources, support, and access they need to respond to and recover from this crisis. Rural America cannot carry the burden of addressing this public health emergency and economic crisis alone, and we urge you to establish a “Rural COVID-19 Task Force” that will ensure their priorities are met in an expedited manner.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

/s/ Amy Klobuchar
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

/s/ Antonio Delgado
Antonio Delgado
Member of Congress

/s/ Debbie Stabenow
Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator

/s/ Xochitl Torres Small
Xochitl Torres Small
Member of Congress

/s/ Jeffrey A. Merkley
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

/s/ Ron Wyden
Ron Wyden
United States Senator

/s/ Thomas R. Carper
Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator

/s/ Tina Smith
Tina Smith
United States Senator

/s/ Catherine Cortez Masto
Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator

/s/ Juan Vargas
Juan Vargas
Member of Congress

/s/ Troy Balderson
Troy Balderson
Member of Congress

/s/ Joe Neguse
Joe Neguse
Member of Congress

/s/ Peter Welch
Peter Welch
Member of Congress

/s/ David Scott
David Scott
Member of Congress

/s/ Tulsi Gabbard
Tulsi Gabbard
Member of Congress

/s/ Darren Soto
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Member of Congress

/s/ G. K. Butterfield
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Member of Congress

/s/ Shelia Jackson Lee
Shelia Jackson Lee
Member of Congress

/s/ Chellie Pingree
Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress

/s/ Alcee Hastings
Alcee Hastings
Member of Congress

/s/ Tom O'Halleran
Tom O'Halleran
Member of Congress

/s/ Ann Kirkpatrick
Ann Kirkpatrick
Member of Congress

/s/ Elissa Slotkin
Elissa Slotkin
Member of Congress

/s/ Ben McAdams
Ben McAdams
Member of Congress

/s/ Ann McLane Kuster
Ann McLane Kuster
Member of Congress

/s/ Deb Haaland
Deb Haaland
Member of Congress