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Dr. Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Dr. Perdue,

As leaders of the Rural Sociological Society, we represent hundreds of social scientists and practitioners who – like you – work hard to improve the lives of rural peoples in the United States. As Secretary of Agriculture, we believe that your leadership and decisions will have a powerful impact on rural peoples and agriculture across a wide range of issues. Based on our collective research and experience, we offer the following thoughts for you to consider as you embark on this exciting chapter in your career.

- **Health care.** All of us were concerned to learn about the recent declines in life expectancy among some segments of Americans. It would seem like the scourge of opiates may have played a role in an appreciable number of these deaths, and research by Rural Sociologists demonstrates that disproportionate numbers of rural Americans have been victims of this epidemic. Under these circumstances, we would urge you to use your considerable influence to maintain and expand access to affordable treatment programs that are required to enable rural Americans to face down this terrible epidemic and obtain the care necessary to lead full lives. We also know that health care costs can be a crippling problem for farm families, most of whom rely on the independent private insurance market for coverage. We urge you to weigh in on debates over the future of the Affordable Care Act to ensure that these families can continue to access subsidies and competitive insurance markets to obtain affordable and comprehensive insurance coverage.
- **Immigration.** Immigrants have provided a critical source of labor for most American farms and throughout our larger food system, and have helped revitalize the social and economic viability of many rural communities (particularly in areas that had experienced population declines). Efforts to reform immigration policies should provide transparent, efficient, and legal mechanisms to continue opportunities for foreign born immigrants to contribute to the growth and development of rural America. Additionally, large numbers of our members work in the land grant universities of the United States. In this capacity, we come into contact regularly with young people, some of them members of undocumented families, who are newly vulnerable to the deportation orders issued earlier this year. These young people represent an important source of innovation and entrepreneurship for our future, especially in agriculture where younger persons will have to replace a large segment of our aging agricultural workforce in the

near future. Deporting these young persons seems like a lamentable waste of human potential that will end up impoverishing us all.

- ***Droughts, fires, floods, and climate change.*** Extraordinary numbers of rural Americans depend on natural resource industries, like farming, fishing, and logging, which succeed or fail depending on weather conditions. For this reason, rural peoples, more so than other Americans, feel the direct impacts of changes in the global and regional climate. We urge you to put into place programs to help farmers and other rural peoples adapt to the now inevitable changes in climate. We also urge you to use USDA resources to help develop new farming systems and technologies that can reduce greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture that have contributed to global climate change. The USDA is the main actor within the federal government and can lead a coordinated national program to help farmers respond to this challenge.
- ***Rural Development.*** Because of their lower population density and distance from major urban centers, rural communities face unique challenges with maintaining infrastructure, public services, and economic development. The USDA has historically been a crucial partner in helping design and implement projects to upgrade rural water and sewer systems, provide training for rural leaders and entrepreneurs, and facilitate regional economic development efforts. Proposed cuts in the USDA rural development budget and proposals to eliminate important regional development initiatives (like the Appalachian Regional Commission and Delta Regional Authority) will severely impact the capacity of rural communities to address the needs of their citizens. The Secretary of Agriculture can be a key voice within the Trump administration to highlight the impacts on rural Americans of these proposed cuts.
- ***Farm Bill Programs.*** The Farm Bill represents a major investment of federal resources with the combined goals of supporting a vibrant farm economy, promoting rural development, and ensuring food security for our most vulnerable citizens. Rural Americans benefit in different ways from these programs, and it is imperative to ensure that future Farm Bills are targeted to benefit both farm and nonfarm residents. Research by rural sociologists has demonstrated that food security and rural development programs are particularly important to the well being of all rural communities, particularly since most rural counties do not rely heavily on agriculture for their local or regional economy. Farm programs that support small- and medium-sized farm operations, historically disadvantaged farmers, and that use incentives to integrate both economic and environmental objectives (like CRP, EQIP, and CSP) are particularly important since they provide important benefits to both farm and nonfarm rural residents.
- ***Research.*** Finally, our joint efforts to cope with the problems outlined above require the timely collection of systematic data about rural Americans, rural communities, rural economies, and the natural resources on which we all depend. USDA plays a vital role in this respect with the Agricultural Census and the National Institute for Food and Agriculture. We urge you to fund these initiatives at levels that will continue to make it possible for us to gather the scientific information needed to address the challenges faced by rural Americans and to ensure that local, state, and federal policy is based on evidence and systematic research.

Sincerely,

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