

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

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SMALL BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

July 13, 2017

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

As you well know, ranchers in North Dakota and throughout the Northern Great Plains are in the midst of an extreme drought. I appreciate the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) opening Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres for both haying and grazing, which was an important step to help farmers and ranchers in this difficult time. However, I believe there are additional steps USDA can take to further help impacted farmers and ranchers regain their footing and compete globally.

Last Thursday, I traveled across southwestern North Dakota – much of which is currently rated by the U.S. Drought Monitor as extreme drought (D3) – to hear firsthand from ranchers, conservation experts, and local leaders about the challenges facing our farmers and ranchers. While many ranchers are currently short on forage, there are additional short- and long-term concerns many have about the drought-related programs and the cattle industry in general.

After the most recent announcements from USDA regarding emergency grazing and haying of CRP, many farmers and ranchers in my state were disheartened to learn that the majority, if not all of their acres enrolled in CRP are not eligible to be grazed or hayed. Under your discretion as Secretary, I request you examine acreages that have not been determined “fully established” and CP-23/CP-23A, CP-37 and CP-38 practice areas for immediate access to emergency grazing and haying. Of the 1,535,496 acres currently enrolled in CRP in North Dakota, 12.08 percent is enrolled in CP23/CP23A, 11.5 percent is enrolled in CP-37, and 8.6 percent is enrolled in CP-38. In total 40 percent of North Dakota CRP acres are enrolled in areas that are currently ineligible to be emergency hayed or grazed. That percentage does not include the acres that are being disqualified due to their establishment designation.

Additionally, one of the concerns I have heard from many North Dakotans is about the insufficient number of staff at local Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices. Currently eight percent of FSA positions in North Dakota are vacant and county staff members are facing increased workloads due to the immediate needs of ranchers having to readjust conservation plans and apply for drought assistance. It is my understanding that due to the staffing shortages, FSA is only able to work on certifying acres and is unable to address any other issues. In this difficult and trying time for our farmers and ranchers, this is extremely concerning to me. FSA is a critical lifeline for my state’s farmers and ranchers, and it is important it has the tools, resources, and staff to be able to assist them. It is important that the USDA work expeditiously to fill

current FSA vacancies in the coming months, but in the meantime, prompt action is needed to supplement current staff to help with the increased workload due to the drought. I request USDA immediately detail qualified and trained staff to these offices to assist not only in certifying acres, but to provide additional assistance to those impacted.

I also ask that you review current disaster relief programs that were created to support farmers and ranchers in times of need. These programs were created to ensure consistent support for farmers and ranchers during difficult times and it is imperative these programs are operating at their intended capacity and that local FSA staff are equipped with the information needed to address farmer's questions and concerns. I also request that the FSA be directed to issue written assurances detailing estimated amounts and delivery times to farmers and ranchers receiving payments from disaster programs. These tangible assurances would allow farmers and ranchers to financially plan for the 2018 planting season, while waiting for payments to arrive and securing credit from lenders. I look forward to working with you in identifying the areas in which these programs are not working for our farmers and ranchers and addressing them in the next Farm Bill.

Lastly, I request USDA examine the current discrepancies between the U.S. Drought Monitor Index and the Pasture Rangeland Forage reports. I have received numerous reports of farmers operating in an area that is under a D1 drought designation, but the Pasture Rangeland Forage report shows they are receiving above normal precipitation. In addition, rain gauges used to determine precipitation levels can be a significant distance away from a farmer's land, sometimes as far away as a county or two. This is concerning because varying weather events can mean adequate rainfall for one farmer but extreme drought conditions for another. I am very concerned these discrepancies are preventing farmers from receiving payment from their rainfall insurance.

It is my hope that by continuing to make forage available through CRP acres and improving programmatic delivery, our ranchers will be able to recover from this drought and continue to support our rural communities. Thank you for your prompt attention to these important requests for my state, and I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,



Heidi Heitkamp
United States Senate