

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20250

October 8, 2020

Dear Secretary Perdue:

Thank you for your efforts to provide much-needed relief to the agriculture sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our producers are the backbone of our economy and play a vital role as the nation works to recover from the challenges of the last 6 months.

As you know, COVID-19 and the USDA's Pandemic Reopening Standard Operating Procedure has significantly limited local Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices from reopening and conducting in-person meetings. As a result, the review of applications for crucial relief programs has been significantly slowed. Farmers in West Texas continue to voice their concern and frustration with these office closures as deadlines pass and planning for the next planting season approaches.

The current federal regulations for reopening agency field offices should be updated now that we know there are effective interventions that slow the spread of COVID-19. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends cleaning and disinfecting of public spaces, social distancing and wearing masks when in close proximity. Schools, restaurants, and workplaces have safely reopened under these recommendations, and local FSA offices, which are crucial to the continued operation and survival of farms, should be able to follow suit.

While federal reopening regulations were necessary during the early stages of the pandemic, they now effectively prohibit necessary entities from physically reopening and processing vitally important applications for relief programs. Our local FSA offices need flexibility to open and allow our patient agriculture producers access to vital resources like the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), the Wildfire and Hurricane Indemnity Program Plus (WHIP+). While ensuring the health and safety of employees is important, we must find a way for these offices to open safely for the sake of our nation's farmers and ranchers.

We encourage USDA to exercise its authority to give FSA offices the flexibility and necessary resources they need to safely reopen. Thank you for your attention to this important matter and for all you do for America's agriculture producers. Please let us know how we can be of assistance.

Sincerely,



Jodey C. Arrington
Member of Congress



K. Michael Conaway
Member of Congress