



## United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary  
Washington, D.C. 20250

FEB 22 2012

The Honorable Jeff Landry  
U.S. House of Representatives  
206 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Congressman Landry:

Thank you for your letter of February 9, 2012, regarding the St. Mary and Lafayette County Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices.

I assure you that no decision about consolidating offices was made without a great deal of thought—particularly as to how service would be maintained. The decisions we made to consolidate and close offices were designed to deal with less money and fewer workers while avoiding furloughs and reduction in force actions that would have had a more disruptive impact on our ability to provide key services, and avoiding reductions in our commitment to technology that will make service more convenient.

In deciding which offices would be affected in FSA, the Department of Agriculture (USDA) followed the guidelines Congress set forth in section 14212 of the 2008 Farm Bill, P.L. No. 110-246, which required FSA, to the maximum extent practicable, to first consider for closure offices with two or fewer employees that were located within 20 miles of another office. FSA utilized Euclidian miles to determine the distance between FSA offices. Secondly, FSA identified all offices that currently have zero employees, no matter where they are located. Of the 131 offices proposed for closure, five are in Louisiana. We have identified the St. Mary County office as being 20 miles from the Iberia County office. The St. Mary office also only has 1 employee. The Lafayette County office is 8 miles from the St. Mary County office, and has 3 employees.

All workers in a closed office will be offered employment options by FSA. Farmers will still get the same service from many of the same people, just in a different location. Farmers will be given the option, however, of being serviced by another FSA county office other than the one proposed if they choose. Farmers will also continue to have the opportunity to vote for representation on the county committee that oversees the county office servicing them.

In regards to your question about collocated FSA and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offices, while the one-stop-shop "Service Center" concept continues to be an important model for USDA, in light of budget concerns I have asked all USDA agencies to evaluate their field office structures. Additionally, each agency's budget has been impacted differently by Congress' cuts and subsequent cuts to the agency's staffing resources. Both Rural Development and NRCS, along with other USDA agencies, are closing offices.

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As you know, section 14212 of the 2008 Farm Bill, P.L. No. 110-246, requires that FSA hold public meetings in any county where offices are proposed for closure within 30 days of the proposed closings being announced. As of February 8, 2012, we have held public meetings in all 131 affected counties. Notes were taken at meetings, and the public was given the opportunity to submit written comments to FSA within 10 calendar days of their county office meeting. All public comments will be reviewed and considered.


The operating budget of the USDA has been cut by over 12 percent in the last 2 years. As a strategy for managing these cuts, we have already reduced travel, supplies, and printing costs, engaged in a thorough review of internal operations that has identified 246 recommendations for change, and instituted a targeted incentive program for our employees who were at or near retirement. During the last 15 months, over 7,000 experienced members of USDA's workforce have retired. Many of their positions will not be filled. In addition, we examined the footprint of USDA around the country and the globe. Our goal is to strengthen service, notwithstanding reduced budgets and fewer workers.

The process, embodied by the Blueprint for Stronger Service, has been worked on for over 6 months and has involved top leadership in the USDA's Washington, D.C., office and in each state. Every mission area is impacted, and virtually every state is involved. Reductions will also be occurring in the D.C. area and regional offices. After the closures are effected, USDA will still have almost 3,000 locations nationwide, and the service that people have come to depend upon will be strengthened without disruptive furloughs or reductions in force and with continued investment in technology to make service in the future even more convenient for our customers across the country.

In spite of decreasing budgets and the difficult choices that USDA has had to make, I am proud to say we have done a record amount of work at USDA: a record number of farm and home loans, a record number of community facility grants and loans, a record number of acres enrolled in conservation programs, record amounts of agricultural exports, and a record number of people using the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program with historic lows in error and fraud rates. All of this led to a record income year for farmers and to a faster rate of decline in unemployment in rural America than anywhere else.

I assure you that FSA, as well as the other agencies and offices of USDA, will remain fully committed to providing excellent service to farmers in Louisiana and all Americans.

Sincerely,



Thomas J. Vilsack  
Secretary