

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4802

September 27, 2011

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, Southwest
Washington, D.C. 20250-0002

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

I am deeply concerned about ongoing reports that the U.S. Department of Agriculture could close the Appalachian Farming Systems Research Center in Beaver, West Virginia and about the impact this decision would have on the 55 employees stationed there, as well as the local community. I am writing today to seek a better understanding of the Department's plans to help transition all 55 Beaver employees under a potential closure scenario, particularly when other West Virginia USDA facilities are under a Departmental hiring freeze. To date, the Department of Agriculture has provided insufficient information about its plans for a transition which would have far-reaching impacts for my state. My constituents deserve better.

I will note that the Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 Continuing Resolution funding allowed innovative research on production technologies and management practices that cannot be replicated elsewhere, to continue. As I have noted to you on prior occasions, I sharply disagree with the Department's decision to close 12 Agricultural Research Service facilities in 10 locations across the country, including West Virginia, and I deeply regret the Senate Appropriations Committee's adoption of the Administration's closure proposal. The research being conducted at the Beaver facility and its role in promoting rural economic development are without comparison, despite your earlier assertions otherwise.

Much has been said in the Administration's proposal and elsewhere about the purported cost savings of closing ARS facilities. The closure of the Beaver facility would in fact be costly. First, there are the physical costs, which I believe the Department of Agriculture is ill-equipped to address. I concur with the Senate Appropriations Committee in the assessment it offered in the Senate Report accompanying the Agriculture Appropriations bill saying, "laboratory closures often cost money in the short-term and do not necessarily provide real savings." I am very interested to know of the Department's exact plans to cover costs associated with decommissioning, relocation, and other expenses associated with the proposed laboratory closures. I look forward to receiving a full and thorough response on these issues, in addition to any cost analysis the Department would have certainly undertaken prior to issuing a decision that severely impacts the well-being of 55 West Virginians.

There are serious human costs associated with this decision. The Beaver employees – the loyal and dedicated West Virginians I have the privilege of serving every day in the United States Senate – are fathers and mothers, active community members, and fellow citizens who

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have devoted their careers to public service on behalf of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Their work is a source of pride for West Virginia and I am deeply grateful for their service. I appreciate your earlier responses to my letters on behalf of the Beaver facility; however, they did not convey any sense of compassion for, or acknowledgement of, the West Virginians affected by the proposed closure. The current budget environment certainly requires that difficult decisions be made, but let us not forget the men and women in West Virginia who will likely be faced with losing their jobs during one of the most deeply constrained economies in recent history. The options for identifying comparable employment in Southern West Virginia are severely limited, and relocating within or outside of the state may not be viable.

Again, I urge the USDA to reverse its decision to close the Beaver facility and the nine other ARS facilities across the country. However, if closure is imminent, I implore you to notify Beaver employees as soon as possible and further, I ask you to help all of the 55 Beaver employees make a successful transition if necessary. I look forward to your personal prompt reply on the agency's plans in this regard by October 14, 2011.

Sincerely,



John D. Rockefeller IV