

United States Senate

March 12, 2021

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

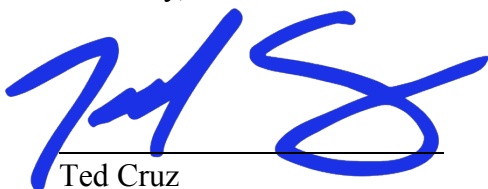
As farmers and ranchers in Texas and other nearby states continue to recover from winter storm Uri, it is critical that they have access to local Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices in order to register for disaster aid programs as well as other United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) commodity programs. Current estimates of agricultural losses in Texas total \$650 million, and USDA's recent guidance that increases workplace restrictions on all Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) facilities, including county FSA and Natural Resource Conservation Service offices, will only delay and undermine the state's recovery efforts. As a result of USDA's policy, county offices are struggling to maintain adequate customer service and meet the needs of many of my constituents as they enroll for key programs.

A one-size-fits-all approach to COVID-19 restrictions for FPAC offices is misguided and fails to account for areas of the country with low or moderate community transmission. Local USDA staff serving in areas across the country are much better situated to understand their community. These decisions should be made at the local level, rather than by directives from USDA headquarters in Washington D.C. or the White House. If nothing else, localized data should be used in decision making to allow for regional variation in office staffing levels. I urge you to provide exemptions or additional guidance for areas of low transmission and allow for greater local control of workplace safety plans.

We can reopen our economy and be smart and safe about it at the same time. FPAC offices can follow CDC guidance—including practicing social distancing—and provide employees a safe working environment while also balancing the needs to serve farmers and ranchers.

Over the last year our nation's farmers experienced the negative impact and uncertainty of COVID-19 on their operations, and now producers all across Texas are facing the devastating effects of an unprecedented winter storm. It is imperative that USDA fully responds to these recent events with expediency and fulfills program obligations. I stand ready to work with you in order to reopen county offices and support Texas farmers and ranchers.

Sincerely,



Ted Cruz
United States Senator