

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

November 4, 2021

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

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Last month marked the third anniversary of Hurricane Michael's landfall, a Category 5 disaster from which farmers and foresters in the Florida panhandle are still recovering. In light of this continued recovery, we write to bring an ongoing matter of serious concern to your attention.

For years, we have heard from our constituents that the Farm Service Agency (FSA) office in Jackson County is chronically understaffed due to vacant positions and is incapable of administering FSA programs in a timely manner. Following multiple engagements between our offices and the FSA concerning these ongoing issues, the agency agreed to hold a roundtable on December 7, 2020, and heard directly from our offices and concerned constituents. Our constituents report that these issues continue to be ongoing and have not improved.

Despite repeated assurances from the U.S. Department of Agriculture that staffing issues in the Jackson County FSA office would be meaningfully addressed, we continue to hear of instances where farmers in the panhandle are struggling to receive timely responses to claims of eligible losses under the Agriculture Risk Coverage and Price Loss Coverage programs, and that payments are not being issued promptly. Constituents report delays in receiving Wildfire and Hurricane Indemnity Program Plus and Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program payments. These unresolved issues are causing a significant burden to the farmers of Jackson County and the surrounding areas served by the Jackson County office, who have also experienced profound economic disruptions from Hurricane Michael and subsequent events, including the coronavirus pandemic and additional tropical cyclones. Jackson County's economy is rooted in agriculture, and these delays represent a grave threat to our farmers and the communities they support.

Additionally, we have heard reports from constituents in Jackson County and surrounding areas who are still awaiting the processing of Rural Development loan and grant applications, many of which were submitted in the wake of Hurricane Michael. Our constituents report that staffing issues are the apparent cause of delays in the administration of Rural Development programs as well.

Given the severity of this situation and the number of years in which this has been ongoing, we urge you to address the staffing issues at the Jackson County FSA office immediately.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Marco Rubio
U.S. Senator



Rick Scott
U.S. Senator



Neal P. Dunn, M.D.
Member of Congress