



February 14, 2018

The Honorable Richard Burr
217 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Burr:

On behalf of the North Carolina Rural Center, a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of rural North Carolinians through the development, promotion and implementation of sound economic development strategies, I write to share our concerns and priorities as Congress prepares to reauthorize the Farm Bill programs and consider an Infrastructure Package.

Rural Development: We urge full funding reauthorizations for Rural Development programs. USDA Rural Development – North Carolina has invested more than \$14 billion in 2009-2016 to provide housing, support community facilities, clean water and sewer, renewable energy, broadband, and small business and entrepreneurship.

The NC Rural Center most actively participates in the Rural Business Development Grant program, the Rural Micro-entrepreneur Assistance program, and the Rural Community Development Initiative Grant program with initiatives to drive investment in small businesses and entrepreneurs, and build leadership capacity in rural communities.

The Community Facilities loan and grant programs help our rural communities build, expand, rehabilitate, purchase, and support the development of police and emergency fire stations and equipment, museums, child care centers, hospitals, clinics, and schools. From 2009-2016, 702 projects were developed and more than \$836 million invested.

We strongly support the Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant program (REDLG) which works with our electric cooperatives to finance economic development projects that create jobs in rural communities. North Carolina is a leader in the nation with 83 projects and almost \$47 million invested from 2009-2016. Another 18 projects were approved in 2017 with almost \$10 million invested. Funding has been used for weatherization, school construction, libraries, public safety, medical facilities and equipment, industrial buildings and equipment, airport facilities, and infrastructure.

The Rural Energy for America Program, the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Loan Program, and the Rural Energy Savings Program all encourage the deployment of renewable and energy efficiency technologies into rural areas which provide jobs and save customers money.

Broadband: Utilize and maximize Rural Utilities Service (RUS) resources to expand broadband adoption in rural and underserved communities. Access to affordable, reliable, advanced telecommunications improves educational opportunities, health care, safety and security, and ultimately, increases employment.

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Access to high-speed broadband is fundamental to increasing economic mobility in minority and rural communities. Efforts must also be made to greatly expand and maximize funding for the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) Universal Service Fund; overturn the FCC recent action repealing net neutrality rules; support the FCC's new \$500 million for Connect American Fund for telephone cooperatives and small rural carriers; and explore ways to make available wireless networks over federal and state lands. We also urge Congress to fund broadband expansion through a major infrastructure package in addition to the Farm Bill. All efforts must be made to ensure that rural customers don't face limited access, higher prices, lower speeds, and substantially reduced future broadband investment. It is critical to economic success for there to be accessible and affordable broadband in rural North Carolina. Connectivity is not a luxury; it is a necessity.

Healthcare: The opioid crisis and access to health care providers and facilities remain the most crucial healthcare challenges facing rural communities. Currently, there are eight rural hospitals in North Carolina at high risk of financial distress. Simply put – the quality of life and the survival of a rural community depends on access to health care services. North Carolina has been a leader in developing telehealth and alternative delivery models to decrease transportation burdens for patients, increase access and lower health care costs, but more must be done and none of it works without high speed broadband availability.

Water and Wastewater Systems: The USDA rural water grant and loan programs have been a valued partner in community development initiatives funded by the NC Rural Center and the NC General Assembly. However, rural communities face a decreasing population thus a lower tax base, aging systems needing upgrades, and are less able to attract and retain experienced staff to maintain small town water and wastewater systems. From 2009-2016, USDA has provided 334 direct loans, loan guarantees, or grants to build, repair or improve public water and wastewater systems in rural North Carolina, for a total of \$560 million investment. USDA and EPA programs are absolutely necessary to meet the growing need for updated rural water and wastewater infrastructure and we urge Congress to provide additional funding in the Farm Bill and Infrastructure Package.

Nutrition: The NC Rural Center's Rural Food Business Assistance Project provides direct technical assistance and training to agribusinesses and builds regional support networks of organizational stakeholders supporting local farmers, value-added processors, distributors, and food service businesses. From 2009-2016, there were 41 Value-Added Producer Grants for a total of \$4.8 million in North Carolina. In addition, we support the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) which remains essential to millions of working families, children and seniors, and oppose efforts to block grant the program. We urge you to support continued investments in SNAP job-training and skills-building programs, and the nutrition education and obesity prevention grant programs. We support providing America's Food Banks with mandatory funding and urge the reauthorization of the Healthy Food Financing Initiative to provide adequate funding for public-private partnerships to invest in grocery stores and other food system businesses to serve low access areas with fresh and healthy food. We are very encouraged by the programs in North Carolina promoting farm to table and food to fork which have gained traction and are bringing urban and rural entrepreneurs together. Local and regional food economies provide important opportunities for many rural entrepreneurs.

Farm Service Agency (FSA) Guaranteed Lending Programs: We support maximum availability and utilization of FSA lending programs by young, beginning farmers, small or organic producers, veterans, and minority and socially disadvantaged farmers. As the existing population of farmers transitions into retirement, the agriculture industry needs to attract and support a younger and more diverse workforce.

Please let me know if you need further information. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Patrick N. Woodie
President