

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 15, 2019

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We write with questions and concerns regarding the effects of the government shutdown on Delawareans who benefit from programs administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). On December 21, 2018, you outlined a plan for agency operations during a lapse in appropriations.^[1] In that notice, you stated that “some USDA activities have been shut down or significantly reduced and that some USDA employees will be furloughed; however, certain USDA activities are continuing because they are related to law enforcement, the protection of life and property, or are financed through available funding.” Recent media reports, however, note that some USDA offices were able to stay open for the first few days of the shutdown by using leftover funding, but “offices across the country are now closed,”^[2] preventing farmers from accessing critical loan programs.

Farmers in Delaware have notified us that the shutdown has disrupted their normal operations and will cause significant hardship to people who rely on USDA programs. For example, we’ve heard from constituents who are unable to contact USDA offices to apply for tariff relief or to receive information on overseas markets. Media reports indicate that Delawareans are also unable to obtain USDA-backed home loans, hampering the ability of new homeowners to purchase homes in the rural areas of our state.^[3]

In addition, while we appreciate the recent announcement that USDA’s primary nutrition assistance programs will be funded through the end of February, we have specific concerns about the USDA’s ability to fund these programs past next month and the distribution of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for February. A lack of clear communications regarding the shutdown and disruptions in federal funding for these programs has already put a significant strain on food banks and could leave more than 150,000 Delawareans uncertain about how they will provide food for themselves and their families. The early distribution of February SNAP benefits will also create confusion and disrupt grocery operations in states like Delaware, where the distribution of benefits is typically staggered.

^[1] <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2018/12/21/secretary-perdue-details-usda-functions-event-lapse-federal-funding>

^[2] <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/01/01/how-the-shutdown-is-reaching-a-breaking-point-1053885>

^[3] <https://www.delawareonline.com/story/news/2019/01/09/delaware-business-community-frustrated-washington-over-shutdown/2523871002/>

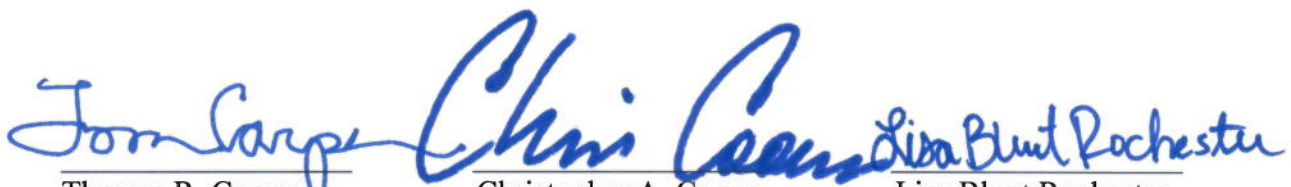
With these concerns in mind, we ask that you review and respond to the following questions by Tuesday, January 22, 2019, so that we may better understand how the Administration is managing USDA programs during the government shutdown.

1. Please provide an updated list of offices within USDA that are now closed or will close due to the lapse in appropriations. How many USDA employees in Delaware have been furloughed because of the shutdown? How many USDA employees are working without pay?
2. Similarly, please provide an updated list of programs that will not be administered by the USDA during the shutdown. How is the USDA working with producers to provide them with timely information about the availability of USDA assistance during the shutdown?
3. Please provide a date for when SNAP and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) will no longer be fully funded if the shutdown continues, along with information as to when and how beneficiaries should expect their benefits to be altered or cease. How is the USDA working to mitigate the negative effects of the early distribution of February SNAP benefits? Is there flexibility for States to issue benefits throughout the month of February?
4. What contingency plans exist to ensure that USDA activities vital to the safety and wellbeing of our constituents are in effect? How does the USDA plan to ensure that the more than 150,000 Delawareans who rely on nutrition assistance from SNAP, TEFAP, and other USDA nutrition programs will be able to provide food for themselves and their families after February 2019?

Thank you for your attention to this matter. USDA employees work hard to support the farmers and producers who feed our nation and play a vital role in administering programs that improve our rural infrastructure, combat the opioid crisis, advance agricultural research, and feed those who are in need. We will continue to urge the President to end this needless shutdown and to ensure that USDA employees can return to their work supporting our constituents. In the interim, we urge you to take every step available under the law to provide relief to those affected by the shutdown and to provide the American public with as much information as soon as possible regarding which USDA programs will be affected going forward.

With best personal regards, we are,

Sincerely yours,


Thomas R. Carper Christopher A. Coons Lisa Blunt Rochester
United States Senator United States Senator United States Representative