



Chairman Hal Rogers

House Committee on Appropriations

**Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Hearing: Agriculture
Opening Statement As Prepared
February 11, 2016**

Mr. Chairman, thank you for yielding. Secretary Vilsack, welcome. I appreciate you being with us today to discuss the Fiscal Year 2017 budget request for the Department of Agriculture.

I want to start off this morning thanking USDA for its tremendous work to help farmers and rural communities in my region and across the country. As you know in Eastern Kentucky, we are working on a regional community development initiative known as Shaping Our Appalachian Region (SOAR). Since the beginning of SOAR, USDA programs such as the Rural Development Community Facilities loan program and the Business and Industry guarantee loan program have played an important role in retaining existing businesses and building new ones.

I also note your continued support for the Single Family Direct Loan Program. I was pleased to see the budget proposal maintained level funding for this program, which helps many of the poorest in rural America achieve their dream of owning a home. The equity rural families build in their homes can be used to create financial stability for generations to come.

In addition, Mister Secretary, you have also recently taken on a new responsibility of critical importance – having been appointed by President Obama to lead an effort to address the problem of heroin and other opiate use in rural communities. As you are aware, my district has felt the scourge of prescription drug abuse for far too long. I look forward to having another warrior on the battlefield as we continue the fight to save lives. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to you for agreeing to speak on this issue at the National Rx Drug Abuse and Heroin Summit in March.

While I do appreciate the many great things you do, I unfortunately find some aspects of this budget request troublesome. In a year where many tough decisions will have to be made during the Appropriations process, it is difficult to understand why the Administration proposed funding such a large number of new discretionary programs. Many of these proposed programs such as the Rural Corps and the Home Visits for Remote Areas seem to be duplicative of programs already offered by the USDA. With so many successful USDA programs already struggling with tight budgets, now is not the time to be muddying the waters with additional initiatives.

Another disappointment in the President's budget request is the reduction in the Business and Industry Loan authorization. This program guarantees loans for rural businesses, which allows private lenders to provide more affordable financing for companies in rural areas. This program has helped create new jobs in my region by helping companies secure the financing they need to establish, expand or modernize rural businesses. I hope you will shed some light on your intentions in reducing this loan authorization.

Thank you for joining us today, Mister Secretary, I look forward to hearing your testimony. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

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