

**Written Member Testimony: Congressman Robert Pittenger**

**Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies**

**March 9, 2017**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for offering the opportunity to speak today. As you may know, last year North Carolina redrew its Congressional District map, making the 9<sup>th</sup> District much more rural. Over the last few months, I've spent countless hours getting to know the hardworking North Carolinians in Union, Anson, Richmond, Robeson, Cumberland, and Bladen County and hearing about the issues they face.

Robeson County in particular has been afflicted by chronically slow economic growth. Identified by the USDA's Economic Research Service as a "persistent-poverty" county, at least 20 percent of Robeson County's population has lived under the federal poverty over the last 30 years. Last fall, the situation was exacerbated by the severe flooding from Hurricane Matthew, the effects of which will be continue to be felt for many years to come.

Robeson is the poorest of all of North Carolina's 100 counties, the most ethnically diverse, and the largest by geography. These factors combined should alter how we determine grants, so we do not preclude cities like Lumberton, the county seat of Robeson County, which is a prime candidate for USDA Rural Development grants. As it stands, Lumberton recently crossed the 20,000 population threshold, effectively disqualifying the town from eligibility of programs like the Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program or Economic Impact Initiative Grants. Lumberton's current population stands at 21,800. Chronically distressed towns, who are the support system for the larger counties, so close to the population cutoff should at least be considered for these grants and loans aimed at ending chronic poverty.

With these factors in mind, I ask the Members of the Subcommittee to accept my language request for increased flexibility of eligibility criteria for USDA Rural Development grant and loan programs. I believe it is common sense that we create the necessary flexibility when making these important determinations, and not prevent critical funding from reaching those in need due to arbitrary population metrics. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to working together with you to help find a solution to this national issue.