



For Immediate Release: February 7, 2007

Barrow Calls on the USDA to Publicly and Fully Disclose its Current Plans for FSA Office Closings

Georgia Congressman says that any consolidation plan must be based on feedback from public hearings and a fair assessment of the local economic impact on effected rural communities

Washington, DC – With the USDA openly considering consolidating FSA offices in Evans and Johnson County, Georgia, 12th District Georgia Congressman John Barrow (D-Savannah) this week called on Agriculture Secretary Michael Johanns to publicly detail his department's current consolidation plans for the nation's FSA offices.

"I'm glad to see that the USDA is out soliciting the opinions of our local communities, but I'm not convinced that these meetings are being met with open ears. A decision to close any FSA office must be based on local input, not solely on the recommendation of some bean counter bureaucrat in Washington, DC. When it comes to the future of our local FSA offices, our farmers deserve to know exactly where the USDA stands on this issue, and if the decision to close certain offices has already been set in stone."

In a letter to Agriculture Sectary Michael Johanns, Barrow requested "a full update on the Department's Georgia FSA plans as they currently exist," saying "it is important that Congress, and our agricultural producers, have a full understanding of the impact that such dramatic changes in services will have on local farmers and ranchers." Barrow's letter was read last night in Johnson County at a gathering of local farmers and will be presented later this week in Evans County:

The Honorable Michael Johanns
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Johanns:

On behalf of the family farmers and ranchers across Georgia's 12th Congressional District, I am greatly concerned over what appear to be continuing actions by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to close or

consolidate local Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices in both Johnson County and Evans County, Georgia.

The work currently being done at these offices is critical to implementing federal farm, conservation, credit, and rural development programs. At a time when the rural economy is suffering from skyrocketing energy costs and weather-related disasters, the last thing we should do is jeopardize the country's FSA delivery system.

I understand from my constituents that FSA offices in Johnson County and Evans County might be planning severe reductions in staffing, and that consolidation plans are moving forward. However, these plans have not yet been fully explored, nor have they been fully vetted by the farmers and communities that will be affected by the USDA's actions.

Before any reductions, consolidations, or closures are implemented, I request a full update on the Department's Georgia FSA plans as they currently exist. It is important that Congress, and our agricultural producers, have a full understanding of the impact that such dramatic changes in services will have on local farmers and ranchers.

Furthermore, I anticipate that FSA will be called upon to facilitate upcoming disaster relief that will be afforded to rural southern areas affected by storm damage and continuing drought problems. A comprehensive analysis of any closing and consolidation plans must, at the very least, gauge the economic impact that a possible disruption in the delivery of disaster relief would have on local rural communities and area farmers and ranchers.

The USDA should hold off on any further implementation of FSA office and staff reductions until Congress has the opportunity to conduct extensive public hearings on the matter, and our local growers, rural towns, and community leaders have been consulted in developing those plans.

Sincerely,

John Barrow

CC:

Hon. Collin Peterson; Chair, House Agriculture Committee

Hon. Rosa DeLauro; Chair, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture

Susan Holmes, Georgia SED, FSA, USDA

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