



UNITED TO GROW FAMILY AGRICULTURE

May 9, 2018

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1600 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

I write on behalf of National Farmers Union's (NFU) nearly 200,000 family farmer and rancher members across the country who are engaged in all forms of agriculture. Extreme weather events, significant drought, and the continued downturn in commodity markets have caused many farmers and ranchers to cope with alarming levels of stress. We call on the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to serve a critical role in providing support to farmers and ranchers in crisis.

Farming is a high-stress occupation. Financial risk, volatile markets, unpredictable weather, social isolation, and heavy workloads can all place significant strain on farmers' and ranchers' mental and emotional well-being. A 2016 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revealed that farmers had a much higher rate of suicide than any other occupation. This is exacerbated by the fact that 60 percent of rural residents live in areas that suffer from mental health professional shortages.

Due to the prolonged downturn in the farm economy, many farmers are facing even greater stress. Net farm income has dropped by more than 50 percent since 2013, and current projections indicate a rebound could be years away. In fact, the Economic Research Service recently forecast net farm income to drop another 6.7 percent in 2018, its lowest level since 2006.

USDA's national reach uniquely positions the Department to assist farmers and ranchers during times of crisis. The Farm Service Agency (FSA) has more than 2,100 offices nationwide and interface with farmers and ranchers on a daily basis. The Cooperative Extension Service plays a critical role in providing education and learning activities to farmers, ranchers and rural residents. Furthermore, USDA's Washington headquarters personnel can leverage relationships with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to identify the most appropriate resources to prevent farmer suicides.

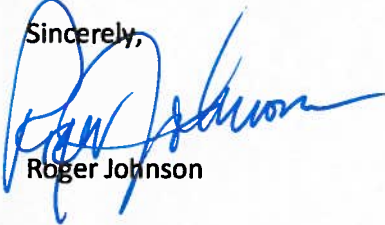
We urge you to leverage your new vision for collaboration across USDA and the entire federal government to develop a response to the farm suicide crisis. Specifically, we request that you:

- Develop and distribute training materials to help FSA field personnel better identify and respond to the signs of mental stress.

- Provide guidance and best practices to Cooperative Extension Services for conducting trainings, workshops and webinars on recognizing and responding to the signs of mental stress.
- Convene agricultural and rural stakeholders at the national, state and local levels to assess the causes of mental stress in farmers and ranchers, identify best practices in responding to that stress, and leverage partnerships with nonprofit organizations and state and local agencies.

Thank you for your consideration of our request. We look forward to working with you on this important issue. If I, or my staff, can be of any further assistance to you, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Roger Johnson

President