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U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

March 19, 2014

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The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

More than a month has passed since the Committee on Natural Resources (“Committee”) sent a letter on February 14 requesting that the Department of Agriculture (“USDA”) abandon any plans to withhold a portion of the FY 2013 Secure Rural Schools (“SRS”) payments as a way to recover the FY 2012 SRS money that the USDA ordered States to return last year. The letter also requested the USDA provide by February 25, 2014 information about the legal authority for those plans and about other available options, among other topics. It is disappointing and troubling that no response has been received.

At a January 14, 2014 Full Committee oversight hearing on the SRS program, USDA’s witness, Undersecretary for Natural Resources and the Environment, Robert Bonnie, claimed that the USDA was obligated to recover the sequestered FY 2012 SRS payments and that the USDA was considering withholding the sequestered amounts from the FY 2013 SRS payments as one option. This proposal under consideration appears to be of questionable legal authority, and only serves to further threaten vulnerable rural communities that are dependent on the SRS program for infrastructure, education, and emergency services funding. Timely responses to these questions should have been easy for the USDA to provide.

The lack of transparency furthers the belief that the USDA remains interested in making sequestration as painful as possible. It is expected that the USDA will promptly and completely respond to the Committee’s February 14 letter without further delay.

Sincerely,



Doc Hastings
Chairman