

Mr. President,

I rise today in support of the nomination of former Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue to serve as Secretary of Agriculture.

Since the beginning of the Trump administration, the Agriculture Department has been left without leadership.

And based on President Trump's decisions over the past few months, it's clear that agriculture and our small towns and rural communities have been an afterthought in this Administration.

It did not help that Governor Perdue was the very last cabinet Secretary to be nominated by President Trump.

The White House then took seven weeks to submit the official nomination paperwork to the Senate, which further delayed our hearing process.

Despite unprecedented delays from this Administration, the Agriculture Committee acted in a swift and bipartisan fashion to approve Governor Perdue with overwhelming support.

Governor Perdue grew up on a dairy and crop farm in a small town in Georgia. He worked as a veterinarian and served as a two term Governor.

He has the confidence of nearly 700 agricultural stakeholder groups who represent farmers, ranchers, conservationists, land owners, and the food and nutrition sector.

He understands that the Agriculture Department has a profound impact on nearly every community across the country.

Whether it's bringing broadband to small towns, supporting lifesaving agricultural research, feeding our children and our veterans, or protecting our forests and natural resources, the Agriculture Department plays a vital role in almost every aspect of American life.

Governor Perdue's leadership is desperately needed by farmers, families and all Americans who rely on the USDA.

For months, rural America has not had a voice in this Administration— and it shows.

President Trump's budget proposal makes it clear that rural America is not a top priority for his Administration. His proposal cuts USDA funding by 21% - the third largest cut to ANY federal agency.

To examine the impact these proposed cuts would have on our country's small towns and rural communities, I have released a report that highlights how President Trump is turning his back on Rural America.

This report demonstrates how the Trump budget would eliminate the rural water and sewer program that repairs crumbling water infrastructure in small towns. This would leave thousands of communities across the country without the ability to provide clean water.

USDA business loan programs are also slated to end, undermining the creation of new jobs in areas where unemployment is already too high.

Many more critical services for rural Americans are also on the chopping block.

Our farmers and families deserve better.

We need a Secretary of Agriculture who will be a relentless advocate for our nation's farmers and the important services USDA provides.

And it's important to stress again that American agriculture and our rural communities are already doing more with less.

In the last Farm Bill, we made responsible, bipartisan reforms that cut \$23 Billion in federal spending and we now know that the 2014 Farm Bill policies are actually predicted to save billions more than expected.

But the budget cuts that the Trump administration has proposed are irresponsible and show a stunning disregard for the current state of the farm economy.

Farm prices are down nearly 50 percent from their highs just a few years ago and producers are struggling to make ends meet.

Rural America is the economic backbone of our country – but too many small towns are still struggling to recover from the Great Recession.

Over the last eight years, USDA has made important investments in rural communities, and we're beginning to see small towns across our country on the road to recovery.

But there's more to do.

Now is not the time for the Trump Administration to turn their back on Rural America.

We need a strong voice to insist that the President listen to the 500 groups that are saying that agriculture, conservation, food assistance and other Farm Bill services are critical to our economy.

Rural America has waited long enough for a leader at USDA. I'm pleased that the Agriculture Committee worked together to promptly and thoroughly review Governor Perdue's qualifications.

After multiple conversations and questions, I am confident that Governor Perdue has the experience, judgment, and commitment to lead this important Department.

In this Congress, we also have a Farm Bill on the horizon. I am confident that Governor Perdue will be a strong partner as we develop a bipartisan comprehensive bill that works for farmers and families across our country.

In my conversations with Governor Perdue, it is clear he understands the challenges farmers are facing from continued low prices.....Especially our dairy producers, who are struggling because the safety-net has not worked as intended.

I am pleased that he is committed to looking for creative solutions in the short-term as well as the long-term.

Now more than ever, we need the next Secretary of Agriculture to be a champion for rural America. I believe that Governor Perdue will look past regional divides and partisan pressures to do what is best for the people we serve.

I urge my colleagues to support the nomination of Governor Perdue.

And I urge this Administration to start supporting the small towns and rural communities that make our country great.