United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 21, 2019

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

Congress passed an overwhelmingly bipartisan Farm Bill in late 2018. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is currently implementing that bill, including several new programs designed to provide immediate relief to farmers struggling with low prices and adverse weather conditions. The USDA's Information Technology (IT) infrastructure has an important behind-the-scenes role to enable farmers, ranchers, and other customers to enroll in programs, access services, and seamlessly access and exchange information in a secure manner.

For a variety of reasons, modernizing IT is a challenge across the federal government and this is no different at USDA. Previous GAO reports have highlighted several of the challenges and projects that have failed to deliver the promised services to customers or employees, ran over budget or over schedule, or all three.

In 2017, the Secretary announced a major IT modernization at USDA to ensure better customer service to America's farmers, ranchers, and foresters. Part of this modernization was the combination of and modernization of the IT systems of three agencies which impact farmers and ranchers most directly: Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Risk Management Agency.

This modernization is intended to help improve the information technology flow between those three agencies, while at the same time improving customer service for farmers and ranchers. However, given the Department's challenges in the past with modernization, we desire a more in-depth analysis of how the Department's plans and its participation in the Centers of Excellence (CoE) initiative will result in reduction of duplication and overlap and improve how the department serves farmers and ranchers. Thus, we request the Government Accountability Office to review the Department's efforts. This review should cover a description, timeline, goals and metrics of the overall CoE efforts in the department, development and functionality of the Farmers.gov portal and all ongoing IT modernization investments that fall under combination and modernization of IT systems listed above. The review should identify and assess whether best practices related to consolidation and IT acquisition, including economic justification, risk management, and requirements management, have been followed.

We are particularly interested in whether the changes have improved, interfered with, or added risks for the successful and timely implementation of the 2018 Farm Bill. For example, enrollment in the new Dairy Margin Coverage safety-net was slated for June in order to provide time to develop the IT. Even with this delay, the IT was initially unreliable and some dairy farmers were told to come back later or had to make multiple trips to complete enrollment. Similarly for the subsequent payment software, some field office employees decided to wait to submit farms for payment until a week after it came on-line in order to avoid the glitches and re-work that they have learned to expect.

We appreciate your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Debbie Stabenow
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry

Gary C. Peters
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on
Homeland Security & Government Affairs