



April 14, 2020

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Azar and Secretary Perdue:

Without question, the COVID-19 pandemic will have significant and lasting impacts on livestock producers and the rural communities in which they operate. In the initial days of prevention and containment, rural communities have already experienced concentrated impacts on community services, small businesses and healthcare facilities.

As groups who represent cattle and sheep producers across the country, we write to highlight needs that are specific to rural areas and ask that the Departments utilize your respective tools to ensure rural healthcare providers are able to respond to cases of COVID-19 while continuing service for other health needs.

We appreciate the assistance already provided to rural communities through various Department initiatives as part of the normal course of healthcare policy. As rural hospitals, clinics, and independent providers encounter more cases of COVID-19, the resources available to these providers will be increasingly constrained. In many rural communities, patients travel significant distances for treatment, and there are a small number of providers. For areas treated by a small number of providers, infected healthcare providers could result in a catastrophic loss of access to care for entire communities. As you implement provisions in the *CARES Act*, we ask that you prioritize efforts to ensure healthcare providers have necessary preventative equipment, particularly where the number of providers are limited across a vast geographic area.

Despite ongoing concerns about COVID-19, rural healthcare facilities continue to provide routine care both for the physical and mental health for their patients. In this age of social distancing, many practitioners are no longer performing elective procedures and are limiting interface with patients where possible. While many agriculture producers fall into the high-risk categories for affliction of COVID-19 because of age and underlying health issues, they should not be faced with a choice of whether to seek routine medical care or comply with social distancing practices. Many rural hospitals and medical facilities are already reporting financial difficulty, and access to stable operating funds is crucial for continuity of patient care. The *CARES Act* recognized the need for timely Medicare payments, and we urge you to respond to

the needs of these hospitals so rural hospitals have access to sufficient operating funds while they focus on critical care.

We appreciate the Department of Agriculture's efforts to improve broadband access to rural communities. Similarly, we appreciate the Department of Health and Human Services' support of tele-health platforms. To that end, we ask that the Departments continue to expand these services to ensure rural communities are able to use technologies that allow for greater tele-health practices. We want to ensure they are able to continue their routine medical care during these difficult times.

Rural communities are likely to face additional healthcare challenges, particularly for producers who are renewing or seeking new access to mental health assistance. As the Departments improve upon tele-health platforms, we ask you to provide flexibility in existing tools and develop additional mental health materials. Prior to COVID-19, livestock producers already encountered significant uncertainty in markets, weather, and livestock health; all of which place continued pressure on their mental health. COVID-19 has exacerbated these uncertainties, and when combined with isolation and limited access to healthcare practitioners in rural communities, livestock producers bear an enormous burden.

We recognize there are widespread challenges facing rural communities and their healthcare practitioners. As you implement the tools and funding Congress has provided, we ask you to ensure rural communities have the resources they need to support the communities that provide food and fiber to all Americans. Working together we will get through this.

Sincerely,

National Cattlemen's Beef Association
Public Lands Council
American Sheep Industry Association