



September 12, 2023

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture
328-A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Glenn "GT" Thompson
Chairman
U.S. House Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture
328-A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable David Scott
Ranking Member
U.S. House Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, Chairman Thompson
and Ranking Member Scott:

On behalf of the nation's local governments, the undersigned organizations welcome the opportunity to work with our federal counterparts toward the passage of a Farm Bill that invests in our rural communities and strengthens the intergovernmental partnership. As Congress works towards reauthorization of the 2023 Farm Bill, we respectfully request our Congressional partners consider allocating greater resources for a rural capacity building program to achieve our shared goal of empowering rural communities across the country, including increasing their ability to access federal grant programs.

Rural areas in the United States are home to 20 percent of Americans and encompass over 70 percent of the nation's land mass. As representatives of local governments, we witness firsthand the numerous challenges facing rural residents, including limited educational opportunities, healthcare disparities, a lack of economic diversification and inadequate digital connectivity. Of the 353 counties that experience persistent poverty, 85 percent are rural. These barriers hinder the potential of rural communities and contribute to widening inequalities between rural and urban areas.

In many states, local governments are limited in our ability to collect property and sales taxes. Despite these limitations, local governments are mandated to deliver essential services to residents and visitors. Such services include road and bridge maintenance, law enforcement, medical care, education, social safety net services, water and wastewater provision, emergency services, fire protection, waste management and more.

The Farm Bill has historically played a pivotal role in supporting rural communities in overcoming these challenges, and we commend your efforts in recognizing the Farm Bill's importance to rural development. Federal programs authorized through the Farm Bill represent crucial lifelines of support for rural governments that would otherwise struggle to provide the range and quality of essential public services on which residents rely.

However, access to rural development resources is often hindered by disjointed and highly complex federal programs that are often poorly coordinated across agencies, presenting additional obstacles for rural communities seeking these resources. Most federal rural development programs provide loans and loan guarantees over grants, offer short-term funding opportunities over multi-year terms, and impose inflexible eligible usages and steep local matching requirements. These factors create a high barrier of entry for potential applicants and fails to account for the limited capacity of rural communities and the systemic challenges they face.

As we approach the 2023 Farm Bill, we must seize this opportunity to invest in rural capacity building on a larger scale. Governing capacity acts as a bottleneck that may dictate whether a community can access rural development resources. Rural local governments that lack the manpower, expertise and capital necessary to access or implement these federal resources will continue to experience growing inequalities between themselves and our urban counterparts. By investing in rural capacity, Congress can allow rural local governments to fully access federal rural development resources and effectively meet the needs of their constituents.

To achieve this, we strongly encourage Congress to provide funding for a rural capacity building program for rural local governments and our non-governmental partners in the 2023 Farm Bill.

Funding distributed through this program would invest in the expertise and capacity of rural governments to plan, implement, and measure the impact of locally-led community development strategies. A rural capacity building program designed to meet the needs of rural communities should incorporate direct assistance to local governments and their partners, support for non-federal technical assistance providers working in rural areas, and enhanced resources to put additional federal representatives on the ground in rural areas through the Rural Partners Network or similar initiatives.

Further, our organizations support including the bipartisan Streamlining Federal Grants Act in the 2023 Farm Bill. This bill will allow local governments across the country, including small and rural communities, to take advantage of federal resources and grant opportunities more easily by simplifying the federal grant administration process. The bill would address the barriers that communities face in applying for complex federal grants due to resource constraints. Many rural communities face human capacity issues, and any simplification of the process will go a long way to improving uptake of grant programs by rural communities.

The 2023 Farm Bill presents a critical opportunity to rethink how federal rural development policy can empower our rural communities. We firmly believe that investing in rural capacity building and simplifying the federal grant process overall are not only essential for the success of our rural communities but also for the long-term resilience of our nation. By investing in rural capacity building in the 2023 Farm Bill, we can foster sustainable growth, reduce disparities, and unlock the full potential of rural America.

Sincerely,



Matthew D. Chase
CEO/Executive Director
National Association of Counties



Leslie Wollack
Executive Director
National Association of Regional Council



Joe McKinney
Executive Director
National Association of
Development Organizations



Clarence E. Anthony
CEO & Executive Director
National League of Cities

CC: The United States House of Representatives
The United States Senate