

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1501

December 3, 2019

Ms. Michelle Christian
Director of the Office of Rural Affairs
U.S. Small Business Administration
409 3rd Street SW
Washington, DC 20416

Dear Director Christian,

Thank you for your testimony before the House Small Business Rural Development, Agriculture, Trade, and Entrepreneurship Subcommittee on November 14, 2019. We are glad that the Small Business Administration has chosen a director to lead its Office of Rural Affairs. However, we still have outstanding questions about the Office's mission and operations.

As you know, the Office of Rural Affairs was authorized in the Small Business Act in 1990. To the best of our understanding, the Office of Rural Affairs was briefly initiated in the early 1990s but never fully established. For over 25 years, despite clear legislative intent, the Small Business Administration has not implemented the law. This year, members of Congress have made several attempts to learn more about the Office with the hearing on November 14 being the latest.

On July 17, 2019, a bipartisan group of 16 members of Congress sent a letter to the Small Business Administration's Acting Administrator Chris Pilkerton to request information about the history of the Office of Rural Affairs and why the Office was disbanded. That letter did not receive a response, and many of its questions were not answered at the hearing.

From the downturn in the agricultural economy to the ongoing trade war with China, our rural small businesses, especially in agricultural communities, are struggling. Farm bankruptcies are up 24% from last year and farm debt is projected to reach a record high in 2019. Financial pressure continues to mount, and we understand that some loan officers are having to turn away farmers who desperately need financing to keep their operations afloat, forcing them to turn to high-interest loans. The Office of Rural Affairs is needed now more than ever, and we want to know that the Office will serve these agricultural operations and businesses.

Therefore, we ask that you provide a written response to this letter within 60 days that includes answers to the following questions:

1. When did the Small Business Administration begin establishing the Office of Rural Affairs?
2. In which years were funds appropriated for the Office of Rural Affairs? What did the Small Business Administration do with those funds?

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3. When and why did the Small Business Administration abandon implementation of the Office of Rural Affairs?
4. When did the Small Business Administration decide to establish the successor Office of Rural Affairs that you now lead?
5. Typically, offices within the Small Business Administration are listed on the agency's website and given a webpage. Unfortunately, a webpage for the Office of Rural Affairs cannot be found. Will the Office have a webpage?
6. When you were appointed, was there a strategic plan in place for establishing the successor Office of Rural Affairs, including details on the Office's size, scope, and budget? If so, please share this plan with us. If not, who is responsible for creating this plan and when will it be completed and provided to us?
7. Section 26(c) of the Small Business Act mandates five specific duties for the Office of Rural Affairs. How will the Office measure its effectiveness in achieving its required functions? Can you describe the Office's other goals?
8. Rural businesses in different parts of the country face different challenges and opportunities. How will the Office of Rural Affairs work with other Small Business Administration offices around the country to ensure it serves all rural small businesses?
9. What is the Office of Rural Affairs doing to stay on top of the crisis in the agricultural economy? What more can the Office do to support our farmers and small business owners in agricultural communities who are struggling to make ends meet?
10. What programs are currently available to farmers and agribusinesses through the Office of Rural Affairs or the Small Business Administration more broadly? How do you plan to expand these services?

We are encouraged by your appointment and hope that this is the start of a meaningful partnership to ensure that the Office of Rural Affairs is serving our rural communities and their small businesses. If you have any questions, please contact Max Ernst (max.ernst@mail.house.gov) with Congresswoman Abby Finkenauer. We look forward to your written response.

Sincerely,



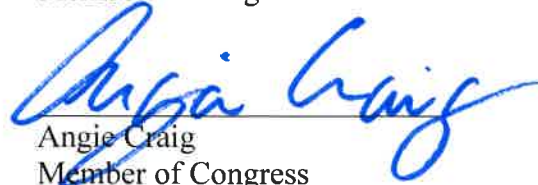
Abby Finkenauer
Member of Congress



TJ Cox
Member of Congress



Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen
Member of Congress



Angie Craig
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