

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 24, 2019

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary, United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We are writing to you regarding the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) memorandum 1076-027 dated March 13, 2019. We are concerned that implementation of this memorandum is derailing ongoing cooperative agreements between the USDA and its partners.

Memorandum 1076-027 states that in order to "serve as a wise steward of taxpayer funds," the USDA will implement new reporting and approval requirements for cooperative agreements. In our view, these new reporting and approval requirements create a barrier that will effectively freeze the implementation of ongoing cooperative agreements between USDA and its partners.

As you know, cooperative agreements provide the USDA with the ability to more effectively conduct vital conservation and forest management projects. The USDA has thousands of cooperative agreements with a vast array of entities including land grant universities, federally recognized native American Tribes, state forestry departments, community based non-profit organizations and conservation corps. Without these cooperative agreements, the ability for the United States Department of Agriculture and the Forest Service to carry out mandated tasks and effective conservation would be drastically reduced.

In addition, it appears the USDA has provided no additional guidance for its partners conducting this field work, leading to on-the-ground uncertainty. Field offices have stopped approving previously routine items resulting in widespread confusion about what the review process actually entails, how long partners will have to wait for approval, or whether specific programs are being terminated. While some partners may operate in good faith and continue to fund cooperative agreements, we do not believe this to be either a fair or sustainable practice. If partners can no longer fund these cooperative agreements while awaiting approval, or if no reimbursement is made after the review has been finalized, it could devastate these crucial partnerships, ultimately costing USDA in terms of money and capacity, and exacerbating risks to already fragile public lands.

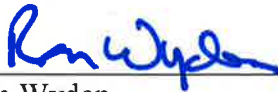
While the desire to ensure taxpayer dollars are spent wisely is commendable, we worry that this additional and extraordinary review of routine agreements will have serious effects on field operations. With busy and potentially dangerous summer months quickly approaching, it is imperative the USDA and their partners begin seasonal programming, including necessary wildfire prevention efforts.

Considering this, we ask that you:

1. Explain the process by which programs are reviewed, including what factors are being reviewed and how much time the review process will take per program.
2. Definitively state whether partners who are currently funding cooperative agreements in good faith will be reimbursed.
3. Highlight how the USDA plans to conduct this review process and conduct vital and time sensitive conservation and forest management programs in an effective manner.

We appreciate your immediate attention to this very serious situation and would anticipate that this will be resolved efficiently and in a manner that continues to respect these very important, cost-effective and long-term programs that protect our public lands.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator