

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 27, 2010

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

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We are writing to request information concerning the USDA's "Know Your Farmers, Know Your Food" Initiative. While the concept of educating consumers about production agriculture is a worthwhile endeavor, we have serious misgivings about the direction of the Know Your Farmers program.

Launched in September 2009, the Department describes the initiative as a way to help Americans eat healthier by "knowing where your food comes from and how it gets to your plate." In addition to organizing college campus lectures and Facebook chats with USDA bureaucrats, the Department's strategy for reconnecting farmers with consumers also involves subsidizing the so-called locavore niche market. Last year alone, the Administration released over \$65 million under the Know Your Farmers banner and has pledged to deliver millions more in Fiscal Year 2011. Unfortunately, this spending doesn't appear geared toward conventional farmers who produce the vast majority of our nation's food supply, but is instead aimed at small, hobbyist and organic producers whose customers generally consist of affluent patrons at urban farmers markets.

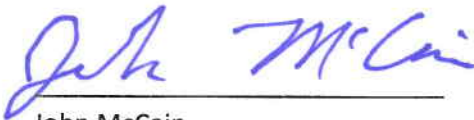
In the name of promoting local food systems, the Department appears to be prioritizing Rural Development grant and loan programs for locavore projects in urban areas, apparently at the expense of rural communities with documented rural development needs. According to an August 26, 2009, memo from USDA Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan, agency chiefs are encouraged to take programs like the USDA Community Facilities Program, which is intended for financing "essential community facilities" related to healthcare and public safety in rural areas, and re-imagine them as grant money for community cooking classes or refrigeration units in urban areas. The Deputy Secretary's memo also expresses her intent to utilize \$31 million in stimulus grants and another \$930 million in stimulus loans for the KYF Initiative, noting that "the Recovery Act presents a great opportunity for non-profit organizations and cooperatives involved with local foods to obtain equipment or facilities that will support their work."

American families and rural farmers are hurting in today's economy, and it's unclear to us how propping up the urban locavore markets addresses their needs. Given our nation's crippling budgetary crisis, we also believe the federal government cannot afford to spend precious Rural Development funds on feel-good measures which are completely detached from the realities of production agriculture. The Department's stated desire to play "match-maker" between a small segment of specialty crop producers

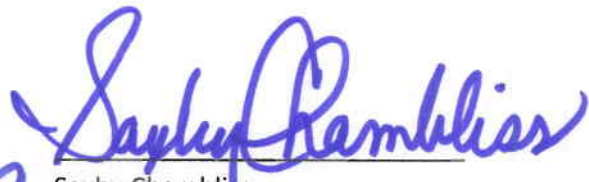
and urban consumers is a questionable use of Rural Development programs authorized under the 2008 Farm Bill. Therefore, we respectfully request you cite the Department's Congressional authority to operate the KYF Initiative as envisioned by Deputy Secretary Merrigan. We also request an itemized breakdown of all award announcements made under the Know Your Farmers Initiative, including a description of the award amount, receiving organization, date of issuance, purpose, location or locations, and under which USDA program the award was made. Additionally, we would like to know when you expect to release the report mandated in Section 6015 of the 2008 farm bill that will describe the projects awarded for local and regional food products under the Business and Industry Direct and Guaranteed Loan Program.

Thank you for your attention to our request.

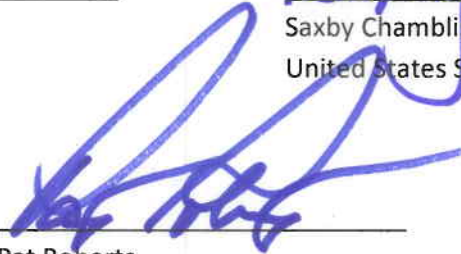
Sincerely,



John McCain
United States Senator



Saxby Chambliss
United States Senator



Pat Roberts
United States Senator