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GOVERNOR LAURA KELLY

January 11, 2022

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

On December 15, 2021, a large, high windstorm swept across Kansas. The National Weather Service reported this event as "a record-breaking, and historic, wind event that caused widespread damage across much of the Great Plains, including Kansas."

Perhaps the most damage in Kansas was from the numerous wildfires that erupted during continuous and sustained winds of up to 80 miles per hour. The fires destroyed numerous homes and building sites in rural areas and burned vehicles and agriculture equipment. In addition, the fires swept across over 160,000 acres of farm and ranch lands that killed livestock, damaged thousands of miles of fencing, and burned up many tons of winter hay and feed stocks needed by our livestock producers for the upcoming winter.

Last week I toured an area in north central Kansas that was charred by the "Four County Fire." This fire burned over 121,000 acres, killed over 1,000 beef cows, damaged 3,000 to 5,000 miles of fencing, destroyed a dozen or more homes and impacted over 80 families in this community.

I had a chance to personally meet and visit with several families who experienced these losses. I was struck by the emotional and financial toll these families are experiencing as they try to recover and rebuild their agricultural operations for the next generation without taking on excessive debt.

On Wednesday evening (December 29) I attended a meeting of over 200 farm and ranch families who met to learn about private and governmental resources available to help address their needs. I'm pleased to report that state and local USDA Farm Services Agency (FSA) and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff were on hand and provided welcomed information regarding several USDA programs that will be helpful to many of those in attendance. As we learn more about these programs, however, we're hearing there are a few concerns with the level of benefits and eligibility criteria associated with these programs.

As mentioned above, several ranchers lost beef cows that would have calved in early 2022. The Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP) will certainly help compensate these producers for the salvage value of their lost herd, but the program falls woefully short in covering the replacement price for their breeding stock. First, the payment rate for a beef cow is \$919.47 and does not differentiate between open, cull cows and young, pregnant cows. The Kansas Department of Agriculture estimates it will cost \$1,600 to \$1,900 to restock with bred cows or bred heifers that will provide a calf crop and income in 2022. Please consider revisiting this payment rate to reflect the actual lost value

Letter to The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Re: Recent Wildfire Damage Across the Great Plains
January 11, 2022
Page 2 of 2.

and replacement costs more accurately for cows, especially bred cows, that were killed due to the adverse weather event.

At this time, farmers and ranchers in the Midwest have rallied to support ranchers in Kansas by transporting donated hay to the impacted areas. Ranchers who experienced fire losses are genuinely grateful and heartened by the outpouring of such support and assistance. It's doubtful there will be sufficient hay provided to sustain all these cowherds until spring green up, especially if there is inadequate moisture this winter and spring for regrowth of the native grass rangelands.

The "Livestock Feed Losses" program will certainly benefit those who will need to purchase feed for replacing hay and forage consumed by the fires. There are instances, however, that ranchers in this part of the Kansas leave ungrazed native rangeland for winter use, especially during the early spring calving season. It's our understanding ranchers using this practice will not be able to claim this lost forage as an eligible loss for the Livestock Feed Loss assistance because it was not "harvested" forage. Please consider modifying this policy or rule and allow ranchers to claim this loss because it's certainly a real and significant loss in their planned forage supply.

In addition, I learned that ranchers whose pastures burned are struggling to relocate pregnant cows that survived to areas suitable for calving. I know some ranchers will be contacting their local FSA offices to seek approval for emergency grazing of Conservation Reserve Program lands for this purpose. I encourage USDA headquarters to support county FSA Committees, County FSA Directors, and state FSA officials if such requests are made, if a blanket approval for the areas affected cannot be granted.

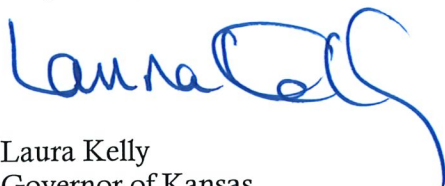
As mentioned earlier, one of the biggest financial impacts of the fires is the loss of ranchland fencing. Ranchers are scrambling to secure the financial resources for replacing and/or repairing fences before spring. One rancher told me he has approximately 45 miles of fence to repair or replace and does not know where he'll find the materials and how he'll pay for it with an approximate cost of \$17,000 per mile.

The Emergency Conservation Program reportedly will help with a 75% cost share agreement, with the cost rate of \$2.14 per foot. Today's price of \$17,000/mile equates to a \$3.22 per foot replacement cost. I encourage USDA to update the \$2.14 value to reflect current replacement costs brought on by significant increases in the costs of posts and wire. Furthermore, I encourage USDA to empower their local personnel to approve fence specifications, for eligible cost share assistance, that reflect commonly accepted fencing specifications that match the local conditions and customs and the current availability of fencing materials.

And finally, please know I'm grateful for all the efforts you and the entire USDA team make each day to improve the lives and livelihoods of our state's farmers, ranchers, and rural residents.

Please let my office know if you have any questions or suggestions regarding these requests.

Respectfully,



Laura Kelly
Governor of Kansas

cc: Kansas Federal Delegation