

September 20, 2021

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Thank you for your willingness to have an ongoing dialogue with the American Farm Bureau regarding our nation's southern border crisis. In August, I traveled to the southern border to learn more about the challenges facing farmers, ranchers and rural communities in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. In those conversations, there was no doubt of the desperate need for federal assistance to aid those who live, farm and ranch in towns along the border. I appreciate the opportunity to share those concerns and how USDA can find solutions to these ongoing challenges.

Local officials, including judges, border patrol agents and law enforcement officers, shared their perspectives on the border crisis. While each of these individuals has separate yet integral roles in managing migration into the United States, all expressed the need for more resources to manage this dire situation. For example, to manage the influx of those seeking asylum, border patrol officials shared the need for more staff and technology. They explained that many border patrol officers are currently working in processing centers to manage the flood of asylum seekers who need to be processed, leaving large swaths of the border without ample authorities to monitor crossings and apprehend those crossing illegally. Law enforcement officers explained the need for more Operation Stonegarden grant funding to allow additional officers to work alongside border patrol. Without ample staff and proper technology to mitigate illegal crossings, migrants with criminal ties can cross the border undetected by the authorities.

Because of the surge in these unaccounted-for crossings, farmers and ranchers near the border in Texas, Arizona and New Mexico are concerned for their safety. These families shared tragic stories of finding dead bodies on their property, having vehicles stolen, and being victims of home break-ins, often in remote areas with no cell phone service. We strongly urge you to work across the federal government to address the need for additional staffing and resources to secure our southern border and afford these families safety. Additionally, USDA should seek solutions to ensure cell phone service is available in remote areas along the border, so farmers and ranchers can promptly notify authorities and get help. Until we secure our border, these farming and ranching communities will continue to live in fear.

Another concern shared by farmers and ranchers along the border is the damage to fields and farming infrastructure such as fences, water storage, and other farm equipment. Law enforcement or border patrol personnel must often engage in high-speed car chases of illegal migrants. To get away from authorities, sometimes migrants will drive through farms and

ranches, damaging fences and fields and endangering livestock. Similar disturbances occur by those who cross by foot with reports of cut fences and broken watering troughs. When these instances occur, farmers must quickly make repairs, bearing the cost in the process. To alleviate this financial burden, USDA should consider using funding to provide cost assistance to farmers with damaged or compromised property because of the border crisis.

The crisis at our southern border is a critical issue impacting American communities in many ways. While AFBF understands that USDA does not have the regulatory authority to provide solutions to all of these challenges, the agency does have the responsibility to advocate for the needs of farmers, ranchers and rural communities across the federal government. USDA can provide a voice to these rural communities negatively impacted by the drastic surge of migration in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona and urge those agencies with jurisdiction to put forward solutions to secure our border. Furthermore, USDA should develop programs to offset the costs of damages to farms and ranches attributed to illegal immigration. The American Farm Bureau stands ready to assist in ensuring the parameters of such a program will meet the needs of the farmers and ranchers the program intends to assist.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Zippy Duvall". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Zippy Duvall  
President