

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 9, 2016

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

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Georgia is home to a thriving poultry industry. Poultry is the largest sector of Georgia's significant agriculture industry, and the jobs of approximately 138,000 Georgians depend on the poultry industry. Therefore, we take any proposed changes that could affect the success of this industry very seriously.

To that end, we are very concerned with the Agricultural Marketing Service's proposed rule (RIN 0581 – AD44) to amend the organic livestock and poultry production requirements. This proposed rule has the potential to have a large and burdensome impact on Georgia.

The proposed rule, announced on April 6, 2016, would regulate practices for organic livestock and poultry, including organic egg production. The Agricultural Marketing Service has claimed that the changes to the National Organic Program are necessary and that "the proposed rule adds specificity to animal production and handling requirements of organic production, which will allow USDA to ensure consistency and transparency across organic production and handling systems, bolstering consumer confidence and strengthening the market for organic products."

However, in practice, the proposed rule would ban proven previously-approved organic production systems, including organic egg production systems, and impose new requirements that would likely force many producers out of the organic business and restrict the supply of organic eggs and poultry products to consumers. In a time when demand and supply of organic products, and particularly eggs, is rapidly growing, it simply doesn't make sense to implement changes that will achieve little in improved outcomes but will cause harm to the industry and the workers whose livelihoods depend on it.

The proposed rule would eliminate the use of "poultry porches" as an accepted practice for allowing chickens outdoor access under the current organic standards. The rule dramatically changes the standards for outdoor access in a way that fails to take into account animal safety, industry investment, practical standards, and food safety.

The proposed rule fails to take into account the enormous burden these changes would have on poultry producers. It also fails to take into account that last year, the United States suffered the worst outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in the history of our country. While the proposed rule claims to take into account HPAI, in practice this simply doesn't make sense. USDA HPAI guidelines state that "all likely sources of virus introduction should be mitigated,"

yet the proposed organics program rule essentially forces birds outside to uncovered areas, where it is more likely they could pick up diseases from migratory birds.

The proposed rule seemingly contradicts guidance provided by the USDA to prevent future outbreaks and stem the flow of outbreaks. It also will create new hurdles for compliance with FDA requirements to prevent the introduction of salmonella.

Aside from concerns with the safety of flocks, this proposed rule is likely to have negative economic impacts on businesses and institutes requirements with which many businesses likely could not comply. In fact, industry estimates indicate that between 70 to 80 percent of current organic egg production in the country would be negatively affected. Even more telling, USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) says in its own summary of the proposed rule that "AMS estimates that up to 90 percent of organic aviaries may transition to cage-free egg production due to marketing opportunities and challenges of complying with the outdoor space requirements." The proposed rule appears likely to raise production costs for organic producers, decrease the supply of organic eggs, and render obsolete millions of dollars of investments into facilities designed specifically to comply with National Organic Program standards.

We strongly urge USDA to reconsider this rule. At a minimum, USDA should provide an extension of the comment period for a minimum of 120 days so that a thorough economic analysis of the proposed rule can be conducted in consultation with affected producers and certifiers. Additionally, we would like to know if USDA consulted with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and other departments within the USDA as to whether this rule would interfere with producers' ability to comply with food safety rules and biosecurity procedures.

We are concerned that rather than providing consumers with more certainty, this rule instead will reduce the supply of organic poultry products and eggs, institute costly burdens on organic poultry producers, threaten jobs, and pose serious animal health and food safety concerns. This proposed rule is an ill-conceived attempt that would burden industry and provide little in the way of consumer benefits.

Given the impending deadline for the comment period and the seriousness of this issue, we request a response by no later than June 20, 2016. Thank you for the attention to this matter, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

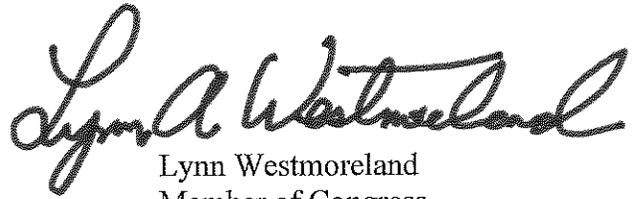


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Member of Congress

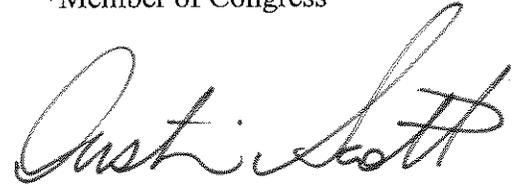


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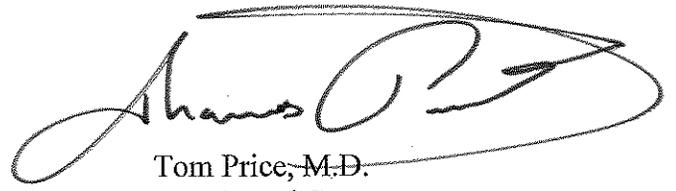

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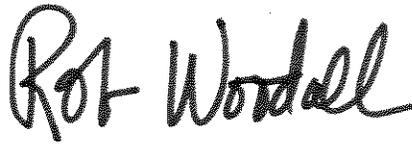

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