

Moran says he opposes FSA plans to close offices

WICHITA (AP) — Rep. Jerry Moran has joined the growing opposition to the Farm Service Agency's plan to close 11 Kansas offices, saying the agency that handles federal payments to farmers should at least wait until Congress finishes the 2007 farm bill. FSA formally announced last month that it would close 11 Kansas offices as it struggles to cope with a declining budget and shrinking staff. Moran, R-Kan., said Tuesday that he had asked the FSA to reconsider its decision.

The agency has projected it would save \$242,000 in rent plus \$46,520 in utilities and other costs by combining the 11 offices with others in neighboring counties.

"This is not about saving money," Moran, R-Kan., whose district encompasses many of the counties where closures are proposed, said in a news release. "FSA has not provided adequate assurance that this plan will result in better services for producers or be a significant savings of taxpayer money. Furthermore, it is premature to close FSA county offices before Congress writes the 2007 farm bill, when future administrative and program needs will be decided."

The current farm bill expires in September.

A day after FSA made its announcement, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the government agency that handles environ-



mental programs for farmers, announced it also would close 11 of its Kansas offices in those same counties.

The FSA and the NRCS are separate U.S. Agriculture Department agencies, but they share office space in the 11 affected Kansas counties. FSA handles farm subsidies, while NRCS handles environmental programs for farmers, funneling money to farmers participating in incentive programs designed to protect the nation's soil, water, air and other natural resources.

The agencies have held public

hearings about the closures across the state, and Moran's comments came a day after the final meeting.

"Part of the mission of the U.S. Department of Agriculture is rural development," Moran said. "It seems counterproductive that while the Rural Development Agency is promoting opportunities in rural areas, another agency of USDA would diminish the viability of small Kansas communities."

Bill Fuller, FSA's state executive director, was in meetings Tuesday

afternoon and did not immediately return a call seeking comment.

The offices that would be close are in Chase, Comanche, Johnson, Geary, Elk, Woodson, Barber, Morton, Wabaunsee, Leavenworth and Gove counties.

The agency has been working with a review committee for almost a year to come up with a consolidation proposal, but it has said the plan could be revised after the public meetings. Kansas has 103 FSA offices that were established in the 1930s and 1940s.

Some farm groups, including the Kansas Farm Bureau and National Farmers Union, have expressed concerns.

And the Kickapoo Tribe in Kansas, which owns the largest farming operation in Brown County, sent letters to Rep. Nancy Boyda and Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns urging the agency not to close NRCS offices in Horton and Hiawatha. The tribe contends it would need both those NRCS offices if it prevails in litigation to build the Plum Creek reservoir.

In 2005, the Farm Service Agency shelved plans to close one-third of its 2,346 county offices nationwide after a groundswell of opposition from lawmakers and farmers. In Kansas, that would have meant the closure of 29 FSA offices.

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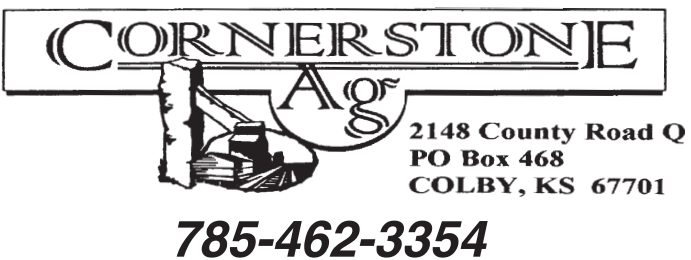


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