

March 4, 2013

Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

The administration has indicated as a result of sequestration "USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) may have to furlough all employees for approximately two weeks. These reductions could increase the number and severity of safety incidents, and the public could suffer more foodborne illness, such as the recent salmonella in peanut butter outbreak and the E. coli illnesses linked to organic spinach, as well as cost the food and agriculture sector millions of dollars in lost production volume."¹

I appreciate your personal commitment to agriculture and farmers and I am confident with your leadership such dire circumstances can be avoided.

Because food safety is vital to our nation's economy and our citizens' health, I would encourage you to first cancel or eliminate unnecessary spending on travel and conferences.

For example, two USDA agencies—Rural Development and Agricultural Marketing Service—are sponsoring the 26th annual California Small Farm Conference next week.² In addition to speakers from USDA agencies,³ the gathering will feature field trips and tasting receptions.⁴ "The Tasting Reception is the most well attended networking event of the conference and showcases the regional bounty from local farms, chefs, wineries, breweries, bakeries and other food purveyors" and "special guest chefs will turn donated local agriculture products into tasty dishes to sample with exceptional local wines, brews and spirits."⁵

Wine tasting is also part of the itinerary at another USDA sponsored gathering—the Priester National Extension Health Conference—scheduled for next month in Oregon.⁶

¹ "FACT SHEET: EXAMPLES OF HOW THE SEQUESTER WOULD IMPACT MIDDLE CLASS FAMILIES, JOBS AND ECONOMIC SECURITY," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, February 8, 2013; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/08/fact-sheet-examples-how-sequester-would-impact-middle-class-families-job>.

² The California Small Farm Conference website homepage, accessed March 1, 2013; <http://www.californiasmallfarmconference.com/>.

³ The California Small Farm Conference website, accessed March 1, 2013; <http://www.californiasmallfarmconference.com/index.php/sponsor>.

⁴ Tim Hearnden, "California conference to focus on small farms, ranches," Capital Press, March 1, 2013; <http://www.capitalpress.com/california/TH-small-farm-conf-w-infobox-030113>.

⁵ The California Small Farm Conference website, accessed March 1, 2013; <http://www.californiasmallfarmconference.com/index.php/vendors/tasting-application>.

⁶ "Priester National Health Extension Conference schedule," Priester National Extension Health Conference website, accessed March 4, 2013; <http://lanyrd.com/2013/priesterhealth/schedule/>.

While these conferences may be fun, interesting and even educational get aways for department employees, food inspecting rather than food tasting should be USDA's priority at this time.

Last week, the Office of Management and Budget advised departments to give increased scrutiny to spending on conferences and travel, noting "in light of the reduced budgetary resources available due to sequestration, expending funds on these activities at this time would in many circumstances not be the most effective way to protect agency mission to the extent practicable. Therefore, agency leadership should review processes and controls around these activities, and ensure that these activities are conducted only to the extent they are the most cost-effective way to maintain critical agency mission operations under sequestration."⁷

In light of sequestration and OMB's directive:

- (1) Does the department plan to cancel its participation in these or any other upcoming conferences or meetings?
- (2) If not, how many employees will attend each of these two conferences and how much is the total cost likely to be to the Department for sponsorship, attendance (by department employees or others whose attendance is supported in any way by the department), and other support for each conference?
- (3) Can you provide a list of all other conferences USDA will host or sponsor for the remainder of Fiscal Year 2013 and the estimated cost for each along with the number of individuals (department employees and others) whose participation is funded in part by USDA expected to attend?

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I would appreciate a response no later than March 11, 2013. It is important that we as public officials lead by example and I look forward to continuing to work with you to save taxpayers money and better prioritize government spending.

Sincerely,



Tom A. Coburn, M.D.
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs

⁷ Controller Danny Werfel, "Agency Responsibilities for Implementation of Potential Joint Committee Sequestration," White House Office of Management and Budget, February 27, 2013; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/memoranda/2013/m-13-05.pdf>.