

# THE FOOTHILLS SUN-GAZETTE

## USDA changes may hit Tulare County hardest

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Farmersville – Recent moves by the USDA may stifle growth in rural communities across the country, especially Tulare County. Last week, the new Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue eliminated the position of undersecretary for USDA's Rural Development branch. Coupled with the Trump Administration's proposed federal budget cuts to nearly every program within Rural Development, rural communities around the country are worried they may not have access to 0% or low

interest loans that USDA offers to them when they don't qualify for financing from traditional lenders.

One of those worried about future funding for his city is Farmersville Mayor Paul Boyer. Boyer said USDA has funded many projects for the city over the years including a recent loan for \$5 million for a new waste water treatment plant (WWTP).

"This facility is a big part of what we need to have growth in our city," Boyer said. "Without it we may have to turn away new commercial and industrial growth that would help us generate our funding in the future."

While the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) is primarily associated with the Farm Bill, agriculture policy and food inspection it also plays a major role in financing needed public infrastructure projects in rural, underserved areas. USDA's Rural Development arm has lent billions of dollars for projects in Tulare County to build new water and sewer systems in hamlets, community centers in small cities and even to transition municipal fleets to more energy efficient vehicles. The money is concentrated in high producing agriculture areas with high poverty rates like Tulare County, which grows a significant portion of the nation's food but has a high incident of hunger and food insecurity for its residents.

Boyer said the \$5 million loan will be paid back over 40 years at just 2% interest. It will be combined with about \$13 million in grants from the State Water Resources Control Board's (Water Board) State Revolving Fund to construct the \$18 million plant. The City has already spent \$1 million in design and permits which will be reimbursed by the State.

"Under the budget proposal, there is 0 funding for water and waste water projects," Boyer said. "Without this money I don't know what we would have done."

When municipal sewer systems pass the 70% threshold for capacity the State Water Board mandates that the City begin plans to expand their WWTP. Tom McCurdy, public works manager with QK Inc. in Visalia, has been working with Farmersville since 2006 when he first identified the need to upgrade the WWTP. McCurdy said the 50-year-old facility has not been expanded since 1978.

Farmersville officially received word from the Water Board that it had to begin plans for a new WWTP in 2014. The current WWTP can process about 1.25 million gallons of waste water per day and is already processing about 850,000 gallons per day. More than just capacity, Boyer said new waste water standards require new WWTPs to filter out nitrates, a byproduct of fertilizer that can cause methemoglobinemia, or "blue baby" disease. High levels of nitrates can cause brain damage or death in bottle-fed infants.

Just to keep up with the increase in waste water created by the city, Boyer said Farmersville would have to purchase an additional 100 acres for additional waste water ponds even if the City did not build a new facility.

“The bottoms of the ponds are plugging because the facility can’t treat the waste water to the point where it can filter back into the ground,” Boyer said. “Once we have a new facility the water will be a higher quality, that will percolate back into the groundwater easier and it will be cleaner before it hits the aquifer.”

Boyer, a community development specialist for Self-Help Enterprises, said he has seen what happens when sewer systems reach capacity. He said the water is unsuitable for recharge and can no longer be stored. Not having available capacity also means city’s cannot issue “will serve” letters to developers, a required document for them to build. That could lead to the State issuing a ban on new development, which would further hamper the impoverished city’s ability to pay for its own needed improvements like sewer and water.

When a system exceeds capacity, McCurdy said it could back up into homes creating a public health hazard, but that “no one would ever let it get to that point. The State would issue a cease and desist order long before that.” Boyer said proposals from both the House and Senate do include funding for these programs but the White House’s budget is concerning for the future of rural areas.

“Rural America spoke in the last election and I would think that the new administration should realize it was agriculture and rural America that supported them,” Boyer said. “Hopefully there is an understanding that the small, rural communities that USDA helps have a lot of people with a lot of needs that supported the President.”

Boyer clarified that Farmersville will no longer qualify for any Rural Development funding for future water and sewer projects because it has surpassed the 10,000 population mark that caps the program. Farmersville’s current population is about 11,000 but the city applied for the funding prior to the 2010 Census when its population was below the threshold. In fact, local officials argue that the City’s population may be closer to 14,000 depending on the number of people who go uncounted, such as undocumented immigrants and seasonal laborers.

“We got the money for our waste water treatment plant in the nick of time,” he said.

Farmersville will continue to be eligible for community facility funding and business enterprise funding, which are capped at 20,000 and 50,000 people respectively. Once Farmersville improves its waste water capacity, those two funding sources will remain essential pieces to the city’s growth. Boyer said community facilities grants and loans from USDA funded the community center which houses the Boys & Girls Club and Tulare County Library Branch and business enterprise program may help Farmersville attract more retail to bolster its sales tax as the City is moving forward with a measure to increase sales tax by one percent on the November ballot. Boyer said Farmersville also needs a new police and fire station, which are currently housed in the same building as the headquarters for the Tulare County Fire Department and Farmersville City Hall. He said the small city will again be asking for assistance from USDA Rural Development when those two projects are needed.

“USDA is the only option for poor communities like ours,” Boyer said. “We don’t really get a glance from more traditional financing institutions.”