

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

November 20, 2015

Tom Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

As you know, industrial hemp research pilot programs were authorized under the Agricultural Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-79) when certain conditions are met. Twenty-six states have laws authorizing industrial hemp pilot studies and/or production as made legal by the Agricultural Act of 2014. However, it is our understanding that researchers participating in the industrial hemp pilot programs have received conflicting information from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) on whether these programs are eligible for federal grant awards from existing USDA funds. Therefore, we are writing to request that you clarify your agency's authority to award federal funds to eligible industrial hemp research programs.

Hemp is prized throughout the world for its array of industrial uses. Currently, 30 countries grow hemp and the U.S. alone imported millions of dollars of hemp products last year. This presents a real opportunity for farmers and researchers throughout the United States. A 2014 report done by the Congressional Research Service documents the growing market for hemp products and its potential to be an economic driver for our country. Our universities and state departments of agriculture are ready to grow and cultivate this agricultural product, according to current federal and state laws.

Since the 1930s, your agency has supported research on industrial uses of commodities. The Critical Agricultural Materials Act of 1984 and various funding bills have supported funding for the research and development of alternative crops in state laboratories and at your agency. Furthermore, the Agricultural Research, Extension and Teaching Policy Act of 1977 (NARETPA; 7 U.S.C. §3319d(c)) authorizes the USDA to award competitive grants for the development of new commercial products derived from natural plant material for industrial, medical, and agricultural applications.

It appears that USDA has the authority to award competitive grants for the development of industrial hemp. Nevertheless, it seems the USDA has provided conflicting information regarding whether the agency is willing to exercise its authority to award existing federal grant dollars for the research of industrial hemp. It is our understanding that some seeking clarity from the USDA on this issue have been told by USDA officials "it is not worth it to apply," while on the other hand, an internal USDA memo dated December 23, 2014 seems to indicate that the USDA is supportive of industrial hemp research and therefore may be willing to award funds for that purpose. The memo from National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) Director Sonny Ramaswamy to Southern Association of Agriculture Experiment Station Directors Executive

Director Eric Young states: "NIFA supports research on the cultivation of industrial hemp and on cultivated hemp provided such cultivation complies with Section 7606 [of the Agricultural Act]."


Due to this lack of consistency, researchers are reluctant to apply for federal funds because of the large amount of time, effort, and cost that goes into any grant application.

To help provide our constituents with information, we would appreciate answers to the following questions:

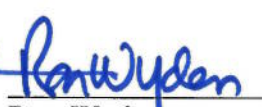
1. Does USDA interpret current law as providing the agency with the authority to award existing and competitive federal funds for the research of industrial hemp?
2. If the answer is yes, what steps is USDA taking to disseminate that information and work with interested parties in the competitive grant process?

We look forward to expedient responses to our questions. Thank you in advance for your review of this inquiry.

Sincerely,



Mitch McConnell
U.S. Senator



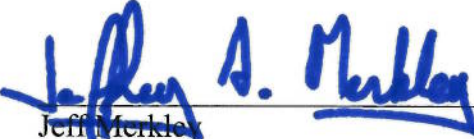
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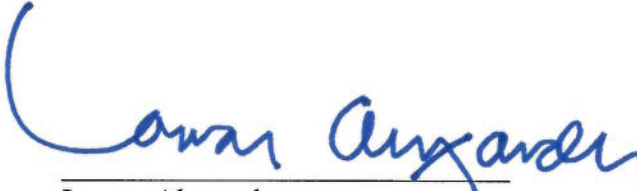
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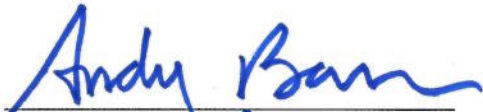
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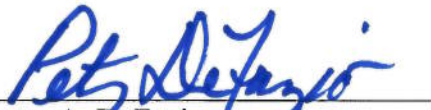
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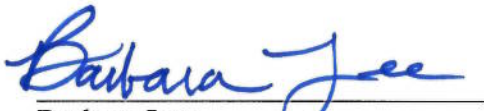
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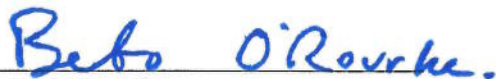
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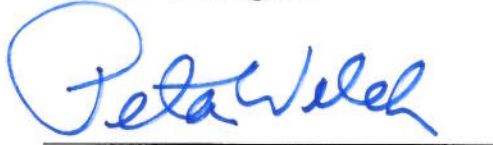
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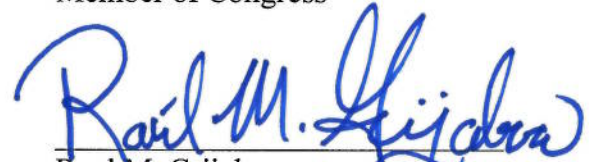

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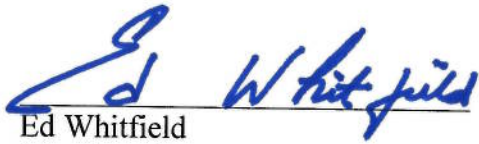

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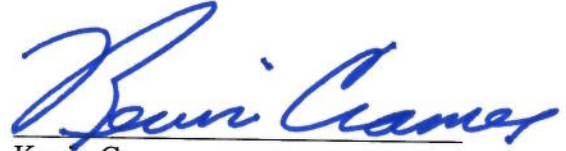
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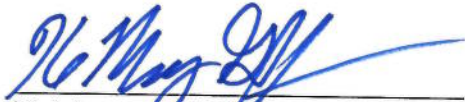
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