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December 19, 2023

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

The Honorable Administrator Andrew Berke
Rural Utilities Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Administrator Berke:

I write to express my strong support for the letters of intent (LOI) submitted by Colorado rural electric cooperatives to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Utilities Service (RUS) Empowering Rural America (New ERA) Program. I deeply appreciate all the work the USDA Rural Development team is doing to roll-out the new *Inflation Reduction Act (IRA)* clean energy programs like New ERA. Colorado cooperatives (coops) are poised to lead the clean energy transition in rural America, and I urge USDA to give their New ERA LOIs full and fair consideration.

With the *IRA*, we made the single largest investment in rural electrification since the New Deal. A critical part of that is the New ERA program, which invests \$9.7 billion to help rural electric coops transition to clean energy. New ERA has the potential to fund larger renewable projects, and even position coops to own projects for the first time, which provides incredible value to the rural communities they serve. New ERA and other USDA clean energy programs play a critical role in accelerating deployment of clean energy, cutting greenhouse gas emissions, creating new local economic opportunities, and lowering energy costs for rural families.

There is enormous interest in USDA's *IRA* clean energy programs like New ERA, where requests for funding total nearly five times the amounts available. In Colorado, rural coops have requested more than \$2.26 billion for 62 projects across the state.

The USDA faces a difficult task choosing projects to move forward given the high number of project applications. I urge the agency to maintain its focus on maximizing greenhouse gas emission reductions, while supporting long-term resiliency, reliability, and affordability as outlined in statute.

I applaud USDA's efforts to encourage and support rural coops to submit LOI's, and urge the agency to move swiftly to review proposals and invite applications. I also encourage the agency to explore all options for providing flexibility within Rural Development's regulations to ensure funding can expeditiously be directed to projects and that we maximize the benefits of the New ERA program. As it makes decisions, I hope the agency will fully recognize the value Colorado electric coops bring to the national clean energy transition as leaders on innovation and decarbonization, while maintaining affordability and reliability for rural families.

I look forward to hearing from you on this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Michael F. Bennet". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Michael" being the most prominent part.

U.S. Senator Michael F. Bennet