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## Officials scrap plans to close hundreds of local farm offices

By Libby Quaid

Associated Press

**WASHINGTON** - The Agriculture Department will abandon plans to close more than 700 local Farm Service Agency offices across the country because of widespread opposition in Congress, an official said Tuesday.

A hearing on the closures had been scheduled for Thursday in the Senate Agriculture Committee. But in a letter sent Tuesday to Chairman Saxby Chambliss, R-Ga., Agriculture Department undersecretary J.B. Penn said the agency is scrapping the plan.

"We recognize that opposition has developed," Penn said in the letter, which Chambliss released on Tuesday. "We thus are prepared to set aside the 'FSA Tomorrow' approach and timetable."

The plan was to close 713 of the 2,351 FSA offices, which are located in rural counties and connect farmers to government programs that provide payments and loans.

The department said its aim was to modernize a system dating to the 1930s, but the plan faced resistance from lawmakers. The Senate voted to block the closures three weeks ago - before they were formally announced.

Chambliss canceled Thursday's hearing on the plan. He said the department had failed to demonstrate that closures would result in better service for producers. "I had serious concerns with the plan," he said.

Department officials argued that farmers were getting poor service from offices hampered by understaffing and rustic technology; FSA's computer system dates to the 1980s and can't use the Internet.

They made the case by arguing that there are only 619 John Deere tractor and equipment dealerships and 200 Farm Credit Services banks nationwide, compared with more than 2,000 county offices.

But Rep. Tim Johnson, R-Ill., who sits on the House Agriculture Committee, said the decision quickly became a hot-button issue in his primarily rural east-central Illinois district in recent weeks and that scrapping it "restores one's faith in government."

"I'm sorry this kind of turmoil had to occur in the first place, but if there is good to come out of this episode it is that officials in Washington were reminded that these vital services are critical to people in rural America," Johnson said in a statement.

In the letter, Penn argued that the system still needs modernization and asked Chambliss to help find support for an overhaul in the next couple of years.

"Properly equipped, better-trained, fully staffed offices will provide superior services to farmers and ranchers," Penn wrote.

The Senate vote was on an amendment to a farm spending bill that would have delayed the closures. A sponsor of the amendment, Sen. Jim Talent, R-Mo., said everyone wants local offices to be efficient but that they must also be easy to reach.

"I was especially concerned because the office closure plan was issued with little or no consultation with our local offices and producers," Talent said.

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Farm Service Agency: <http://www.fsa.usda.gov>