May 23, 2014

Branch Chief
Regulations and Paperwork Management Branch
U.S. Department of Agriculture
STOP 0742
1400 Independence Avenue
Washington, DC 20250-0742


Ladies and Gentlemen:

The Council for Affordable and Rural Housing ("CARH") provides its comments to the proposed regulations in Environmental Policies and Procedures. We appreciate the U.S. Department of Agriculture ("USDA") providing the opportunity to comment.

CARH represents for-profit and non-profit companies providing affordable rural rental housing throughout rural America. CARH is the only association that solely represents the needs of the entire rural affordable housing industry. For over 30 years, CARH has served as the nation’s premier association for participants in the affordable rural housing profession, including builders, owners, developers, managers, non-profits, housing authorities, syndicators, accountants, architects, attorneys, bankers, and companies that supply goods and services to the industry.

The proposed rule is basically the consolidation of two existing agency regulations that implement the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other applicable environmental regulations. The majority of the proposed changes relate to the categorical exclusion provisions in USDA’s procedures for implementing NEPA. We believe this is a highly technical regulation, and many of the changes may not be fully realized until after implementation. We are concerned that non-federal parties under proposed Section 1970.14 may try to utilize the proposed rules simply to block the development of certain properties. Our members develop and operate affordable housing properties. There can be opposition to providing housing for low income, elderly and disabled persons. While it is important to mitigate unreasonable environmental impact, we are concerned that these regulations may be used to slow or block the development of affordable housing due more to blocking poor families than real environmental impact. We ask that USDA take these concerns into account and allow for a procedure to appeal any public objections or findings where the object is to develop needed affordable housing.
Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback and support for this Initiative. Please contact the undersigned at 703-837-9001 if there are any follow-up questions or requests for additional information.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Colleen M. Fisher
Executive Director