

April 23, 2020

The Honorable George Ervin “Sonny” Perdue III
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We are 128 state legislators from 34 states writing to you as state policymakers who are gravely concerned about COVID-19 and the impact on our local food and specialty crop producers.

Significant revenue losses are projected for the multibillion-dollar local food industry in which producers sell directly into local and regional markets.

In view of Congress’s decision to allocate some \$9.5 billion to support local food production during and following this public health emergency, we write to urge the U.S. Department of Agriculture to focus its discretionary authority in the allocation of these resources to mitigate the financial harm to those producers working to ensure that our communities have local, fresh and wholesome food, as well as to prevent the structural damage to markets that would set back regional and community-based food system development for years to come.

At a time of economic and social disruption—when the potential for innovation, enterprise and entrepreneurship are greatest—we encourage the department to support the continued development of emerging, sustainable models for food production, processing, and distribution, that also have become lifelines for food banks and school feeding programs across the country.

We are concerned that Congress gave little guidance for how this CARES Act appropriation will be spent. And we are conscious of the fact that many of our local producers, Black farmers, and underserved minority farmers who do not currently participate in USDA programs could be overlooked in the distribution of funds.

We insist that the USDA solicit and respect the recommendations of the local food experts in our state departments of agriculture and land grant universities, as well as the voices of food producers and the many other players in our local and regional food systems, as you strive to ensure the equitable distribution of federal resources.

For example, we suggest that you strongly consider allocating a major portion of the appropriation to state departments of agriculture in the form of block grants, based on reasonable metrics associated with food production and domestic consumption, so that each state can address its unique needs based on a model other than “one size fits all.”

Whether the funds are expended through the states or directly by USDA, we urge you to ensure that the resources are equitably distributed to benefit local food producers.

A number of USDA programs rely on local food producers for their success, including the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program, Double Up Food Bucks, and the Produce Prescription Program. If additional funds cannot be allocated to these programs directly, then direct support under the CARES Act for local producers who supply such programs will be essential.

We support the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition in many of its recommendations and urge USDA to observe the following principles in making these decisions:

- Ensure that aid to local and regional food system food producers is commensurate with expected losses of more than \$1 billion;
- Invest in and offer support for market development designed to foster the stabilization, growth and increased sustainability of the production of food for local and regional consumption;
- Prioritize small- and mid-sized farms that sell directly into local and regional markets, with special attention to farmers historically underserved by USDA;
- Provide funds directly to producers, including livestock contract growers, and not to integrators, packers, or processors likely to be eligible for aid through other programs;
- Ensure that information about applying for aid is readily accessible, provided in multiple languages and formats, and that assistance for applicants with limited English proficiency is readily available;
- Not limit aid to farmers that are already participating in federal programs; farms should not be required to have an FSA number in order to receive aid;
- Provide outreach to farmers about aid opportunities that is thorough and robust, including outreach to urban farmers, indigenous farmers, Black farmers, minority farmers, very small and limited-resource farmers, and farmers with limited English proficiency;
- Guarantee that the Inspector General has all of the information to ensure a timely and robust audit of the implementation of the agricultural provisions in the CARES Act.

Further, we urge USDA to extend grant deadlines for applicants to recognize the hardships that they are experiencing and to ensure the utmost flexibility during the national public health disaster.

We thank you for your attention and consideration, and we look forward to working with you to engage our constituents involved in local agricultural systems, now and in the future.

Sincerely,

The undersigned

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Colorado

Representative Della Belati
Hawaii

Senator Shenna Bellows
Maine

Representative Joel Briscoe
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Representative Julie Brixie
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Representative Bri Buentello
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