



April 17, 2020

The Honorable Secretary Perdue
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

I commend the actions you and your agency have taken so far to address the impact COVID-19 is having on agriculture in the US. However, in New York, the effects the COVID-19 pandemic is having on our families and our communities is devastating. New York State has almost 40% of the total number of COVID-19 cases in the country. The challenges the agricultural industry is experiencing are exacerbated by the imbalance between supply and demand, recent tariff issues, and heightened competition. While the mediation of the Coronavirus Aid Relief package, and Economic Security (CARES) Act packages will help, additional action in New York State is needed.

I urge you to use your powers under the Coronavirus Aid Relief package, the Economic Security (CARES) Act, and all other means possible to provide direct assistance and payment to farmers affected by the COVID-19 pandemic by considering the following:

Agriculture Sector

- **Block Grant Opportunity.** A block grant would allow for states to allocate funds to eligible producers/agriculture businesses at the discretion of state agriculture leadership. With specific knowledge of their own state's needs, state leadership is in a good position to distribute funds. We ask USDA to provide an initial \$500 million of the \$9.5 billion CARES Act package available to state departments of agriculture. All states should be given a base allotment, but state's like New York - who are the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak - should be proportionately compensated to cover the entire duration of their state shutdown.
- **Designate Food Workers as First Responders.** Food workers and their employers should be considered first responders and be eligible for hazard pay and reimbursement for purchasing personal protective equipment (PPE). We ask USDA to support Congressional plans to provide all essential employees within the food supply chain with additional hazard pay. Additionally, we ask USDA to set aside money from the \$9.5 billion CARES Act package to reimburse farmers, food manufacturers, food distributors, food warehouses and grocery stores for their past purchase of PPE in response to the COVID pandemic.
- **Alter Existing USDA Funding Grants.** We ask USDA to allow states who have existing USDA grant funding to redirect funds to respond to the COVID-19 crisis.

Financial Assistance

- **Provide Emergency Relief.** We ask USDA to provide a safety net to the agriculture industry and use its authority to provide lending assistance to producers, under emergency economic provisions. This was used in the 1980's to financially assist the agriculture industry.
- **Provide Commercial Bank Loan Rates.** We ask USDA to ensure that all agricultural commercial bank loans provide the same rate as the Small Business Administration.
- **Provide Farm Service Agency (FSA) Loans.** We ask USDA FSA to provide short-term no or low interest loans to producers during this emergency.

- **Provide Assistance for Livestock, Aquaculture and Honeybee Sector.** We ask USDA to direct payments to producers who have lost significant sales due to restaurant closures, food restrictions and/or market changes. USDA should utilize, where appropriate, existing authorities under the Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees, and Farm-raised Fish.

Specialty Crops

- **Provide Direct Payments.** Specialty crop, horticultural, floricultural growers and equine operations who lost their markets and/or experienced income losses due to this crisis will need direct payments to survive. We ask USDA to make payments available to these businesses experiencing immediate impacts, regardless of size.
- **Create a Specialty Crop Block Grant Program.** The Department joins NEASDA in asking USDA to create a specialty crop block grant program. The funding for this program should be increased and the eligibility criteria should be modified to increase each state's ability to grant funds directly to specialty crop producers. We ask USDA to explore redirecting funding from the Specialty Crop Multi-State Program to a program that allows states to directly support specialty crop businesses, especially those that have a supply chain impact.

H-2A and Farm Labor

- **14-day Travel Quarantine:** We ask USDA to work with their federal counterparts to pay H-2A workers who have been quarantined. Currently the federal government is requiring all citizens and non-citizens entering the US to self-quarantine for 14-days. Some coming to the US are coming here to work and, with testing being limited, may not be able to work for the 14-days they are in quarantine.

Healthcare

- **Community Health Centers.** We ask USDA to provide funding to community health centers that are providing critical rural health care services to our farm communities. We ask USDA to advocate to its federal counterparts to provide free testing and medical care related to COVID-19 to food industry workers, including farm workers, who are considered essential.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

- **Expand SNAP Flexibilities to Include Online Purchasing.** New York State farmers and SNAP users would benefit greatly from allowing SNAP users to make purchases directly from farms online. This should also apply to farmers' markets. We ask USDA to provide every possible flexibility within the SNAP to maximize the buying power of the program's recipients.

The agriculture industry is crucial to the health and wellbeing of our population. While we wait for the benefits of the Federal Corona Financial Aid packages to take effect, we must take all steps possible to protect the long-term sustainability of one of the nation's most vital industries.

I thank you for your continued efforts to advance agriculture in our nation. I urge you to consider this request and look forward to developing a solution that works for our farms and communities.

Sincerely,



Richard A. Ball
NYS Commissioner of Agriculture

cc: Barbara Glenn, NASDA CEO, David Fisher, New York Farm Bureau President