

April 17, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Perdue,

We would like to show appreciation to you and all USDA staff for your rapid response efforts in support of agriculture during this COVID-19 pandemic. Many farmers and food producers are struggling as markets are closed and typical mechanisms for connecting with consumers are restricted to preserve public safety. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has an opportunity to support our agricultural communities, maintain a healthy and viable food system, ensure our neighbors are fed, and retain jobs in the agricultural sector.

The \$9.5 billion in aid designated by Congress for specialty crop and livestock (including dairy) producers who supply local food systems (including farmers markets, restaurants, and schools) is important to the viability of agriculture across our county and throughout our northeast region. We encourage a strategy to get resources directly to producers and other agricultural-related businesses as quickly and efficiently as possible during this COVID-19 time of crisis. Suggestions that will achieve timely and direct assistance to businesses most in need include the following:

- Establish a block grant opportunity for states or regions (i.e. Northeast) to allocate funds to qualifying producers/ag businesses, at the discretion of state agricultural leadership with acute knowledge of market channels and sectors in greatest need of immediate direct support.
- Explore an opportunity for USDA resources to be allocated to existing state-level economic development programs and /or marketing programs to (e.g. Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Initiative) focused on granting and marketing efforts to support agriculture and food businesses.
- Expand FSA loan availability to producers but with 0% interest rates as repayment plans are daunting without assurance of market stabilization on the horizon.
- Increase funding for Specialty Crop Block Grant Program and modify eligibility criteria to increase state’s ability to grant directly to specialty crop producers. Explore redirecting funding from 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.
- Explore an opportunity for states with existing USDA grant funding (e.g. Dairy Business Initiative, Acer Access and Development Program) to alter their current work plans to respond to COVID-19 recovery needs. Discuss the opportunity for expanded scopes of work with an addition of funding through existing programs.
- Consider modification of the Local Food Promotion Program to provide economic stimulus aid that includes: tiered-payments based on criteria of business type, gross sales, and # of employees; simple applications for states; lowest barrier to participation possible.

- Consider long term grants for technical assistance and marketing support to states to help agriculture and food businesses plan and respond to lost markets, challenged supply chain, and shifts in consumer demand.

All of these methods would be extremely helpful to our agriculture and food businesses in our States.

Thank you for your consideration and, please feel free to contact us on this important issue.

Sincerely,



Bryan Hurlburt
Commissioner
Connecticut Dept of Agriculture



Michael T Scuse
Secretary
Delaware Dept of Agriculture



Amanda Beal
Commissioner
Maine Dept of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry



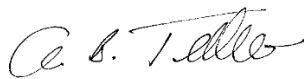
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cc: Dr. Barb Glenn, National Association of State Departments of Agriculture