

United States Senate

April 13, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue Southwest
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We write on behalf of specialty crop producers to ensure that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) considers the needs and significant financial losses specialty crop producers are facing as a result of COVID-19. The *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) Act* established a \$9.5 billion disaster fund and specifically included producers of specialty crops as eligible for assistance. As USDA specifies how this assistance will be provided, we ask that you ensure that specialty crop producers receive assistance that is commensurate with the losses they are facing.

Specialty crop producers grow the nutritious fruits, vegetables, and nuts that are essential to a healthy diet. With the onset of COVID-19, the fresh produce industry has experienced \$5 billion in losses, with additional losses expected in the coming months. Contracts with restaurants, schools, and the hospitality industry have been cancelled, and redistributing this product presents significant challenges for some crops.

Specialty crops have already faced challenges due to trade disputes with foreign countries, and lost markets abroad have resulted in a substantial decrease in revenues, as products that normally would have been exported are now flooding the domestic market. Producers are also facing increased costs in order to meet social distancing requirements and adequately protect their workers from coronavirus. For example, producers are experiencing increased production costs and challenges planting, harvesting, packing, and processing certain products. All of these factors are contributing to increased uncertainty for specialty crop producers.

In addition to fruit and vegetable production, many producers of horticulture, floriculture, and nursery plants are experiencing or have projected steep losses as a result of COVID-19. States have inconsistently designated garden centers as essential, which puts businesses at risk during the busiest time of year

for gardening purchases and landscaping. Further, social distancing and the cancellation of all events have reduced consumer spending on cut flowers.

We, therefore, respectfully request that USDA provide direct payments to eligible producers who have lost revenue and are experiencing increased production costs related to COVID-19. As USDA considers allocations of these funds, we ask that USDA take into account losses as a result of coronavirus that are incurred beyond the designated health emergency timeframe. Farmers with peak harvest crops in the summer and fall also face considerable uncertainty so accurately accounting for and addressing those losses will be critical. To immediately reduce the inventory of product and stabilize prices, we also ask that USDA purchase fresh and processed specialty crops for redistribution to food banks, schools, and emergency feeding organizations. Farmers have lost contracts with schools and restaurants, schools that are continuing to serve fresh product have substantially reduced their orders, and producers are experiencing challenges exporting product, all of which have contributed to surplus inventories.

It is vital that USDA utilize all of the programs available to make additional purchases. Additional funding for nutrition programs provided by the CARES Act, supplemental to existing USDA spending authority and programs like Section 32, will assist producers and provide nutritious food to those in need. At a time when Americans are facing job losses on an unprecedented scale, and food banks are experiencing increased demand, a policy that can both support farmers and provide food for those in need is a win-win. It is critical that USDA also prioritize approval of pending Section 32 requests and designate methods to expedite purchases going forward in order to provide immediate relief for industries ahead of harvest season.

Thank you for your efforts to support the specialty crop industry, and for your continued efforts in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sincerely,



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator

/s/Debbie Stabenow
Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator

Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator

Susan M. Collins
United States Senator

Ron Wyden
United States Senator

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

Gary C. Peters
United States Senator

Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator

Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

Brian Schatz
United States Senator

Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator

/s/Robert P. Casey, Jr.
Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator



Patty Murray
United States Senator



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator



Kirsten E. Gillibrand
United States Senator



Tina Smith
United States Senator



Robert Menendez
United States Senator

/s/ Chris Van Hollen
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator