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April 21, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
11400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

As you are no doubt sadly aware, the economic effects of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have devastated countless American communities. Because of this, thousands of Americans are now experiencing food insecurity, with thousands more likely to find themselves in similar straits as lockdown measures continue and job losses skyrocket. Food banks have reported miles-long lines and widespread shortages of much-needed agricultural commodities. The level of demand for food support is, quite simply, unprecedented.

Even more tragically, while Americans are going hungry, farmers and agricultural producers are being forced to destroy healthy crops because of cratering demand from restaurants. A recent *New York Times* article described farmers “burying tens of thousands of pounds of onions and leaving them to decompose in trenches,” “dumping thousands of gallons of fresh milk into lagoons and manure pits,” and “smashing 750,000 unhatched eggs every week.”¹ Lacking the resources to prepare and distribute their goods, farmers are left with no choice but to destroy perfectly healthy produce. This situation is intolerable.

On April 17, USDA announced its new Coronavirus Food Assistance Program, providing \$19 billion in support for agricultural producers and partnering with regional and local distributors to purchase \$3 billion worth of fresh produce, dairy, and meat. USDA’s announcement also notes the availability of \$873.3 million in Section 32 funding for the purchasing of agricultural products to be delivered to food banks.

While this program is certainly a crucial—and welcome—step, any agricultural purchasing program administered through USDA will take some time to design and deploy. For thousands of Americans experiencing food insecurity, speed is of the essence: they cannot wait until a new purchasing and distribution program is fully

¹ David Yaffe-Bellany & Michael Corkery, *Dumped Milk, Smashed Eggs, Plowed Vegetables: Food Waste of the Pandemic*, N.Y. Times (Apr. 11, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/business/coronavirus-destroying-food.html>.

operational. So too, farmers and agricultural producers have goods available right now, many of which will spoil if not immediately harvested and brought to consumers.

Fortunately, the 2018 Farm Bill points toward a way forward. That bill allowed the federal government to fund states' emergency food assistance programs in order to pay for the harvesting, processing, and transportation of commodities donated by agricultural producers, where those commodities will be used by emergency feeding organizations like food banks.²

The CARES Act provided USDA with \$9.5 billion in funding to be used at your discretion to support agricultural producers.³ I urge you to immediately use a portion of that funding to provide farm-to-food-bank support modeled after the 2018 Farm Bill's approach, but without the 50% state-contribution requirement. Taking steps to immediately provide for delivery of healthy, farm-fresh produce directly to the people who need it most, rather than allowing commodities to rot in the fields from lack of demand, will ensure that emergency feeding organizations—including faith-based groups providing such services—immediately have the resources necessary to serve the American public during this difficult time.

To be sure, any regulatory adjustments necessary to permit such farm-to-food-bank interaction cannot compromise food safety. But the federal Farm Bill has already laid out the groundwork for an approach that maintains high standards of quality while ensuring that emergency feeding organizations have ready access to farm-grown produce. I encourage USDA to take whatever regulatory measures are necessary to help make that vision a reality.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Josh Hawley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Josh Hawley
United States Senator

² 7 U.S.C. § 7507(d); *see also* 7 C.F.R. §§ 251.6, 251.10.

³ Pub. L. 116-136 (Div. B, Title I).