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May 1, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Perdue:

As the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) considers applications and implements the disaster food purchasing program, I urge you to provide flexibility for farmers and ensure a wide variety of food products in the boxes.

As you know, COVID-19 has created an unprecedented crisis for our country that has tested the strength of the food supply chain. Many farmers have lost markets as a result of cancelled contracts and the closure of restaurants, the hospitality industry, and schools and universities. At the same time, families across the country are grappling with unemployment and struggling to put food on the table. While SNAP is the first line of defense for families facing food insecurity, distributing any excess food in the supply chain to families in need is critical. I appreciate USDA's actions to establish a framework to connect Americans with fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy products, and meat, as long as the program is implemented in a flexible and effective manner that addresses the needs of both farmers and families.

I urge the Department to take the following actions to maximize aid and distribute a wide variety of food products via all scales of distribution:

- Given the tight turnaround to establish partnerships and submit the applications for a brand new program, the Department should allow the option for additional applications or flexibility to modify contracts throughout the summer if necessary. Many distributors may not be able to fully account for projected need or identify all partners when submitting the application. Modifications would ensure affected producers with late-season harvest would have the opportunity to participate as well. It is also vital to ensure

that local food and specialty crop providers who may not have existing relationships with distributors have the time to make those connections. Food banks are also stretched thin with a 70 percent increase in demand. They must be able to provide ongoing input and modifications to deliveries based on need and capacity.

- I appreciate that the Request for Proposals allows for distribution networks to cover a region or small subset of a region. However, concerns remain that larger distributors will outbid these local networks. If local or regional distributors have the capacity, local support and reasonably comparable bid, preference should be given to local or regional plans to maximize dollars and utilize existing relationships, while using local product in the region to the greatest extent possible. A strong bid should be based on a variety of factors and should not discount distributors who have not participated in federal contracts.
- The Request for Proposals does not require that the fresh fruit and vegetable food boxes contain a variety of products. While food banks should have the flexibility to request product in the method and quantity that meets their needs, it is important to ensure all types of fresh fruit and vegetables should be able to participate in the program and not be excluded by distributors based on price.
- Because the focus of this program is supporting farmers and families in need, it is critical that USDA work to maximize the funding utilized to purchase food for distribution and maximize the efficiency of labor and distribution. Funding should be adjusted based on availability of products in the supply chain and demand from food banks for additional food. I'd ask that you adjust monthly allocations of funds accordingly to account for this supply and demand.
- Farmers across the country are being forced to destroy produce, dump milk and euthanize animals due to shifts in demand and supply chain problems. USDA should give a preference to proposals that directly prevent food waste and source from these farmers and processors that have an oversupply rather than drawing down on existing stocks of stored production or supplying products that still have strong commercial demand.
- The 2018 Farm Bill created a new Milk Donation Program that reimbursed partnerships between dairy cooperatives, processors and charities for certain donation costs to remove a disincentive for donation. It also created a Farm to Foodbank Program to help cover some of the costs for farmers to donate their product to food banks. I urge USDA to make these existing partnerships eligible for the purchase program and expand them to

provide additional products. These partnerships typically do not involve a traditional distributor and USDA should not arbitrarily exclude these proven efforts that could be ramped up.

- The Request for Proposals only allows for precooked pork and chicken products in the meat boxes and only fresh fruits and vegetables in produce boxes. I urge the Department to consider available and seasonal products, as well as working with food banks to meet the needs of their requests.

I also respectfully encourage the Department to continue approving purchases through other USDA purchasing programs, such as Section 32, to move surplus products to emergency feeding organizations.

Thank you for all of your work to respond to the challenges created by COVID-19. I appreciate your consideration and please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Debbie Stabenow". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Debbie Stabenow
Ranking Member