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May 26, 2021

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Thank you for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) continued efforts to respond to COVID-19. More than one year into the pandemic, many food banks, farmers, and processors along the food supply chain continue to face ongoing challenges. In the two recent COVID-19 assistance packages, Congress provided a combined \$5.5 billion to help repair our broken food supply chain, protect workers, purchase surplus food for donation, and improve resiliency for the future. As USDA begins to implement these investments, I encourage the Department to take swift action and use creative approaches to help farmers and families recover from the pandemic.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act and the American Rescue Plan directed USDA to purchase and donate fresh food, including fruits and vegetables, meat, dairy, seafood, and eggs. Given that disruptions still exist in the supply chain and food insecurity rates remain elevated, I urge USDA to make purchases utilizing the authority provided through this provision. Incorporating fresh produce and local food into procurement programs through a more flexible purchasing structure presents an opportunity to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables and benefit local producers long-term.

While I appreciate USDA's efforts to provide more produce to families through the new TEFAP produce box program, I believe these purchases should be in addition to what is provided through other programs.

Nonprofits that do not currently have the ability to safely store and distribute perishable food should also be able to take advantage of the infrastructure investments included in these bills and should incorporate food safety training if they do not already. USDA should allow these funds to support the work that organizations are doing to connect surplus healthy food from retail establishments and distribute it to those in need. The pandemic has also made clear that not all Americans in need are able to access emergency food assistance programs. For this reason, USDA should ensure that rural and Tribal communities are reached and that halal and kosher options are available.

Infrastructure is a critical component to helping employers respond to both the ongoing immediate needs of the pandemic and future needs for supply chain resiliency. Employers have made and continue to make significant investments in order to protect their workers from COVID-19, continue operations, or pivot to respond to changing consumer needs. Employers needs vary greatly by size and sector, so USDA should provide enough flexibility in food supply chain funding to address both future capacity building and retroactive reimbursement for the investments employers have made since the beginning of the pandemic. This is also an opportunity to better prepare the food supply chain in the event of a future disruptive event, and I urge USDA to assess how the weak points in the supply chain can be addressed.

The bills provided funding for grants and loans, which will help cover both small and larger investments. Grant funding should be used for smaller projects, such as installing plexiglass, ventilation system upgrades, buying or renting additional cold storage, or reformatting a packinghouse to allow for social distancing. Loans present an opportunity to invest in large-scale infrastructure to build resiliency, such as expanding or building new meat processing facilities or new cold storage warehouses in rural areas as first mile and last mile storage for perishable food. USDA should also consider other options such as funding for on-farm value added production, investing in grocery and agriculture cooperatives, training for business management and special skilled workers such as butchers and farm managers, and technical assistance for food businesses that will increase resiliency in the future. Rural Development and the Agricultural Marketing Service within USDA should collaborate to implement these provisions in order to address all food supply chain infrastructure needs including the support and oversight of investments in brick and mortar infrastructure.

Existing USDA programs can be effective in accomplishing these goals. Allocating a portion of the funding toward programs like the Healthy Food Financing Initiative and the Local Agriculture Market Program Regional Partnerships will help ensure we are reaching all facets of the supply chain to improve food access and respond to COVID-19. The Business and Industry Direct and Guarantee Loan, Rural Cooperative Development Grant program, Value-Added Producer Grants, Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program, Intermediary Relending Program, and Community Facilities Programs through Rural Development could also be used for supply chain infrastructure loans and grants for upgrades and improvements. Training and technical assistance money could go to cooperative extension and other business training organizations to assist with new food business development and help small food businesses upgrade storage equipment.

Throughout the pandemic, workers in the food supply chain have put their lives at risk so Americans can put food on their plates. Protecting and supporting workers from farms to processing plants is not only the right thing to do, but it allows the food supply chain to continue effectively. Employers should demonstrate how this assistance will be used to protect workers rather than being diverted to other uses. Working with trusted community partners will also be vital for continued vaccine distribution.

I appreciate USDA's commitment to responding to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Debbie Stabenow". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a horizontal line underneath it.

Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry