

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

COMMITTEES:
APPROPRIATIONS
COMMERCE
HEALTH, EDUCATION,
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

April 17, 2020

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

The Honorable Steven Mnuchin
Secretary
Department of Treasury
1500 Pennsylvania, NW
Washington, DC 20220

Dear Mr. President and Secretary Mnuchin:

As conversations between the Trump Administration and congressional leaders regarding COVID-19 response legislation continue, I am writing to request that you support including funding and reforms to help farmers and the food industry in future COVID-19 legislation. Our nation is facing severe agriculture and food supply chain challenges as a result of the temporary, but necessary, steps people across our country are taking to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in their communities and to protect the health of vulnerable Americans. Farmers, food processors, grocery retailers, and the workers who keep the food supply moving have stepped up to meet these extraordinary challenges, and I commend them for their selfless commitment to the essential work of feeding our nation and the world during this chaotic and dangerous time. I write to urge you to recognize their critical service to our nation by supporting legislation that directs resources to the states so they can work with food and agriculture stakeholders to stabilize the food supply chain, address serious threats to worker safety, and avoid severe economic losses for rural America.

Across the country, there has been a rapid shift in where consumers are purchasing food and eating their meals. In the course of just a few weeks, consumer purchasing from restaurants and other places to eat away from home has declined precipitously. For the businesses that provide food to restaurants and food service venues, demand has crashed, leaving them with extremely difficult decisions about how to proceed, and few workable options.

When a food processor suddenly halts production, there are major impacts in the food supply chain. Farmers suddenly lose the market for their product and are left with highly perishable products that must be processed within hours or days. Fresh milk, our meat supply, and perishable produce must get processed on time or they go to waste. In Wisconsin we are already feeling these impacts acutely. Dairy farmers have suddenly lost markets and been unable to find a place to process their milk in time, so they have been forced to dispose of it. Farmers with livestock that are ready for market have seen the value of their work and quality of their meat wasted for lack of a stable supply chain. Local farmers whose livelihoods depend on the success of restaurants serving their locally-grown products have seen their entire businesses upended, all at one of the busiest and costliest times of the year—spring planting.

The economic losses predicted from these impacts are staggering, and if we respond rapidly, we can help to reduce the worst losses. Without restoring supply chains and the economic impact they fuel, we could see many farms close and food processing businesses shut their doors permanently, despite the temporary nature of these disruptions.

Simultaneously, these supply chain disruptions are harming consumers at a time of great uncertainty, when people face health risks from taking simple actions like being in close proximity to others when shopping for essentials. As shoppers and grocers work to adapt to social distancing best practices and medically sound personal protective measures, everyone is being asked to step up and do their part for the common good. However, many of these issues cannot be promptly addressed without costs and troubleshooting. Grocers are reporting delays in receiving personal protective equipment (PPE) for their employees, at the same time that grocery workers have died from exposure to COVID-19. We must do better to protect these essential workers and to aid the businesses that are working to serve the public in this unprecedented time.

Critically, we must also act now to address supply chain issues to ensure consumers have steady and reliable access to food. Farmers, food processors, and grocers have done incredible work to respond rapidly to changing demand and to get food to our grocery stores during demand spikes they rarely see. However, we have still seen shortages of staple products, including milk. At a time when Wisconsin farmers are disposing of milk because they cannot get it processed, it is outrageous we are not getting that milk to consumers who need it. Additionally, many families are facing enormous financial strains as medical necessity, layoffs and the need for child care keep workers home. During this extraordinary time, we must focus our attention on food insecurity and make sure that people have access to the high quality agriculture products our farmers and food processors have worked so hard to produce.

These supply chain issues are unfolding rapidly and shifting from week to week. In order for responses to be effective in moving food, stabilizing the rural economy, and feeding people across our country, we need to act quickly and locally. For this reason, I urge you to support Food and Agriculture Emergency Block Grants to States. These block grants should be made available to the governors and allocated in coordination with relevant state agencies, including Departments of Agriculture, Economic Development, and Extension services. Funding should be prioritized in accordance with a state's contributions to the local, regional, and national food supply.

The block grants should be flexible in order to give states the ability to solve the most pressing needs on the ground. Funding should be used to help businesses solve COVID-19 challenges including rapidly shifting workforce needs, ensuring workers have safety protections, and responding to changing demand. Funding should also be used to help businesses reprocess food-service scale products to family-sized packages, help connect businesses with new customers, and find ways to prevent the waste of food.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this request for support to our states as they work with their farmers and food businesses to feed our nation in crisis.

Sincerely,



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

CC: Mitch McConnell, Majority Leader, United States Senate

CC: Chuck Schumer, Minority Leader, United States Senate