

July 28, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell, Majority
Leader
Russell Senate Office Building, 317
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Speaker
1236 Longworth H.O.B.
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer, Minority
Leader
Hart Senate Office Building, 322
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy, Minority
Leader
United States House of Representatives
H-204, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leaders McConnell, Schumer and McCarthy:

As Congress considers additional relief measures for the U.S. economy in response to the evolving COVID-19 pandemic, the produce industry strongly urges additional resources be provided to assist growers in protecting their workforce from this new threat.

Our nation has been pushed to the limit by the COVID-19 pandemic. While businesses and schools were shuttered across the country to slow the spread of the virus, U.S. farms were deemed essential and asked to continue feeding the American people. Vital to these efforts have been the hardworking, skilled men and women who grow, harvest, and ship our food – the farmworkers. Collectively, we represent farmers who grow the majority of our nation's fruits, vegetables and tree nuts. They place the highest priority on the health and safety of their employees, and have taken extraordinary measures to insulate their employees from the risks of exposure to COVID-19. From the beginning of the pandemic, countless U.S. farms have adopted best practices including social distancing, enhanced hygiene, disinfection and sanitation procedures, COVID-19 worker training, and the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

As the COVID-19 crisis continues to evolve, and despite the good faith effort being exhibited throughout the U.S. produce industry, the reality is that just as every other segment of our economy and society have experienced confounding cases of transmission, no perfect solution exists that will keep food on American tables while completely avoiding transmission of this virus to our workers. That is our goal, but as farmers continue to adapt their COVID-19 assessment and control plans to the latest public health guidance, more support from Congress will be required to approximate that mark.

In particular, farmers need access to additional testing for their farmworkers, priority access to PPE and a vaccine and/or therapeutic medicines as they become available, as well as funding to quarantine those who test positive for COVID-19 and to isolate individuals who have been exposed to others who tested positive for COVID-19. Some farms have been fortunate to find available tests, and are paying for their workers to be tested – but in rural parts of the country, finding tests for potentially hundreds of workers can be very difficult, and testing results are often long-delayed. Furthermore, the expense of widespread and frequent re-testing, if feasible, is also beyond the financial reach of many farms, most of which are family-owned and operated. Other farming operations have taken the next step and are renting hotel rooms to isolate or quarantine positive and exposed employees, if such accommodations are available. However, it is cost-prohibitive for many farms to provide 14 days of isolation/quarantine lodging, which in many cases is stretching beyond that period as testing and lab results are badly delayed. Compounding the costs of testing and housing are additional COVID-19 expenses, including masks and gloves, disinfectants and sanitizers,

touchless thermometers, and other administrative and engineering controls. Most farmers have some of these supplies on hand and are providing them to their employees, but not all are adequately stocked and the list of supplies and other requirements continue to expand as we learn more about COVID-19.

The U.S. produce industry has already lost billions of dollars to the pandemic, largely due to the early collapse and slow recovery of the foodservice sector, and it continues to endure billions in losses every month during the COVID-19 crisis. Some local and state governments are stepping in to provide financial assistance to protect agriculture workers from COVID-19, but such support has been limited and sporadic, which is why additional financial backing from the federal government is necessary. Granted, several federal programs have been put in place to help farmers recover lost income, but they generally only reimburse pennies on the dollar. More assistance will be required to help farmers overcome the unique challenges agriculture faces in preventing and controlling the spread of COVID-19.

The men and women who work on our farms are essential to the well-being of our entire nation. We call on Congress to include vital resources for farmworker safety in the next COVID-19 relief package. Thank you for your continued attention to the needs of agriculture workers and their employers as we collectively work to keep food on American tables during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Sincerely,

American Farm Bureau Federation

California Apple Commission

California Blueberry Commission

California Blueberry Association

California Citrus Mutual

California Fresh Fruit Association

Florida Blueberry Growers Association

Florida Citrus Mutual

Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association

Florida Strawberry Growers Association

Florida Tomato Exchange

Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association

Idaho Potato Commission

Maine Potato Board

National Council of Farmer Cooperatives

National Potato Council

National Watermelon Association

New Mexico Chile Association

North Carolina Potato Association

Northwest Horticultural Council

Olive Growers Council of California

Potato Growers of Michigan, Inc.

Produce Marketing Association

Texas Citrus Mutual

Texas International Produce Association

United Fresh Produce Association

United Potato Growers of America

Ventura County Agricultural Association

Washington State Potato Commission

Western Growers

Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers Association