

April 6, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House of Representatives
Washington DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Republican Leader
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leader McCarthy,

As Congress develops urgently needed additional legislation to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, on behalf of the California communities that we serve, we urge legislators to do much more to ensure that healthy, safe and affordable food is available to all, and to minimize the challenges facing farmers, food workers and farmworkers who are risking their own health to keep our food system going.

Before this pandemic, more than 6 million Californians were food insecure, and the economic crisis exacerbated by COVID-19 will leave millions more without access to affordable healthy food. From farm to fork, your response to the COVID-19 pandemic must ensure that these people – the millions of food insecure households in California, and an estimated 3 million individuals in California employed in the agriculture and food industries – have the economic security necessary at this critical time to feed and support themselves, their children, their families and their communities.

Congress got it right by including in the Family First Act and CARES Act provisions that provide financial assistance to food banks, school nutrition programs, farmers and restaurants forced to close. But these bills do not protect food and farm workers doing their essential jobs. Food and farm workers need to be designated “first responders” because they are on the front lines of this battle. They deserve not only our gratitude but adequate protection and provision for their health, safety and financial security. They need access to adequate information about the virus and their rights. They need paid sick time so that if they do contract the virus, they can take time off to get better. They need basic safety equipment, like handwashing stations, and basic protections, like six feet of space between workers. They need health care when they do get sick, and they need fair compensation for the risks each of them takes every day to keep us fed. In addition, the CARES Act fell short of what’s needed to keep farms going, keep newly unemployed food workers afloat, and to help keep food on the table for all people in this country facing hunger, especially our seniors.

As you develop new legislation to address the COVID-19 pandemic, we urge you to:

- **Protect food and farm workers** – Much more needs to be done by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA, which needs to issue an Emergency Temporary Standard to mandate that employers offer adequate protections for front-line food-chain workers and others at risk. These protections must ensure that the food and farm workers who grow, manufacture, stock, sell, and transport our food have adequate protections from the virus, including personal protective equipment. USDA should also issue food and worker safety guidance to school food service workers, operators and volunteers, and provide them with protective gear.
- **Expand food and farm worker benefits** – Congress should do more to support newly unemployed food and farm workers by expanding the number of weeks that workers are eligible for unemployment benefits. Congress should also ensure that food and farm workers are designated as first responders and are eligible to receive state benefits such as childcare, overtime, premium pay and have the right to organize.

- **Expand paid leave** – To protect the health of food and farm workers and their families, and reduce the spread of the virus, Congress should provide free COVID-19 testing regardless of immigration status and provide universal paid sick days and paid family and medical leave. What’s more, Congress should expand health care coverage by paying for medical treatment related to COVID-19, by increasing the federal share of state Medicaid expenditures, and by adopting policies to help unemployed food and farm workers obtain health insurance.
- **Support farmers in need** – Farmers are ready to meet regional food supply needs. To ensure that they can do so, Congress should place a moratorium on farm foreclosures and expand grant and loan programs. Priority in financial assistance from USDA should be directed to those most susceptible to economic downturns, including socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers and those who have lost local and regional markets due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All farmers receiving financial assistance should demonstrate how funds will bolster local and regional food and economic security.
- **Support local and regional food system infrastructure** -- Congress should provide direct assistance to local and regional food businesses such as farmers markets, CSAs, food co-ops, food hubs, processors and distributors by directing stimulus funding to the Local Agricultural Marketing Program (LAMP). This will help ensure that local and regional farmers can deliver their products to local and regional markets, including local families, supermarkets, schools, food banks, and other institutional food providers.
- **Enforce food safety laws** – In light of recent actions to weaken enforcement by the EPA, Congress should ensure that the USDA, EPA and the FDA enforce laws that keep our food supply safe, especially environmental laws that protect farm workers from pesticides and protect our drinking water supplies and laws that limit line speeds in meat and poultry processing.
- **Support families facing hunger** – To support families facing hunger and provide an immediate boost to the economy, Congress should increase the SNAP benefit by 15 percent and raise the minimum monthly benefit to \$30, and suspend the three-month time limit on SNAP benefits for some adults. Congress should also suspend the public charge rule and take other steps to prohibit discrimination in anti-hunger programs. USDA should also use its authority to make it easier to provide meals to low-income families during school closures, many of whom are food and farm workers, by issuing a nationwide waiver for area eligibility. Congress should also double funding for the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (“GusNIP”).
- **Support elderly people and families** – Congress should immediately expand the definition of “homebound” in the Meal to Wheels program to include all seniors. This will help reduce the threat the virus poses to the most susceptible Americans.
- **Support food vendors** – Congress should do much more to support independent restaurants, including street vendors, corner stores and independent grocers, by providing grants, reforming loan forgiveness standards and expanding zero-interest loans, and by extending loan periods.

California's food and farm workers are working long hours, at enormous personal risk, to make sure store shelves are stocked and families are fed. Millions of restaurant workers have lost their jobs. Mom and pop restaurants face the risk of economic ruin. And many families who lost their jobs or depend on school meals may now go hungry.

As more workers become sick and job losses grow, our nation's food farm system will be tested. We must get ahead of this with proactive measures rather than play catch-up later. Congress must do much more to provide the resources and policies we need to protect workers and ensure that healthy, affordable food is available to all.

Food and farm workers have always taken care of us. It is in our national interest to take care of them.

Sincerely,

Agricultural Institute of Marin
ALBA
Beauty's Bagel Shop, Inc.
California Institute for Rural Studies
Californians for Pesticide Reform
Center for Food Safety
Ceres Community Project
Community Action Marin
Community Action Partnership of San Bernardino County
Community Alliance with Family Farmers
Community Cultural Tours
Community Water Center
CUESA, Center for Urban Education About Sustainable Agriculture
Ecological Farming Assoc (EcoFarm)
Ecology Center
Everyone's Harvest
Food Shift
Farm Discovery at Live Earth
Fibershed
Friends of the Earth
Garlic Press Jess
Greenfield Union School District
Humboldt Food Policy Council
Kitchen Table Advisors, project of Multiplier

Kuli Kuli
Long Beach Fresh, project of Social and Environmental Entrepreneurs
Marin Food Policy Council
Multiplier
National Young Farmers Coalition
Occidental Arts & Ecology Center
One Meal a Day
One Seed One Community
Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust
Pesticide Action Network
Plumas-Sierra Community Food Council
Policy Committee, Nutrition & Fitness Collaborative of the Central Coast
Riverside Food Systems Alliance (RFSA)
Roots of Change
Sacramento Food Policy Council
Santa Cruz Community Ventures
Sarah Marschall Strategy
Smitten Ice Cream
Sierra Harvest
Slow Food California
Slow Food East Bay
Slow Food Sonoma County North
Sustainable Agriculture Education
Veritable Vegetable