

January 11, 2021

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

With the signature of the COVID relief package, USDA is now directed to distribute \$100 million in funds through the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program. The below organizations representing specialty crops from across the country would like to offer some recommendations to USDA and state departments of agriculture in terms of utilizing and prioritizing this supplemental funding.

As stated in the legislation, this funding is being provided “[d]ue to the impact of COVID-19 on specialty crops,” This funding should be focused on COVID-19 related issues. To that end, **our top priority is to protect the health of our employees and the workforce**. And while the specialty crop industry has taken a number of important industry-driven actions related to this effort, additional funding to buttress these efforts comes at a critical time. Therefore, as we look at the addition of these new resources through the Specialty Crop Block Program, there are a number of priorities that come into focus:

1. Utilizing funding for workers’ PPE against COVID, such as gloves, masks, hand sanitizer as well as touchless thermometers. Funding should be allowed for reimbursing those COVID PPE investments made since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020.
2. Funding should also be directed at COVID related infrastructure improvements that producers have made and will make to protect their workforce, such as the installation of plexiglass or other appropriate divides, and ventilation upgrades including reimbursing those improvements made since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020.
3. Funding should also be directed at offsetting costs related to COVID prevention measures within worker housing changes and transportation of the workers; including reimbursing those improvements made since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020.
4. As our nation prepares to undertake a massive vaccination program, our workforce faces unique challenges (i.e. language, culture and remote or rural worker populations). Funding should be utilized to help offset out-of-pocket expenses related to vaccination of farmworkers, packing and processing workers, and other specialty crop industry front-line employees. One element of vaccination will no doubt require a significant education and outreach campaign for employees and employers and that too should be eligible for funding.
5. Due to COVID-19 disruptions of market channels, funds should also be utilized to provide for product marketing and promotion of locally grown fruits and vegetables.

These are a few examples that we suggest be considered as this needed COVID-related funding is allocated to state department of agricultures and then to the specialty crop industry across the country. Finally, Congress intended, and we agree, that this funding should be thought of **as separate and distinct from the traditional specialty crop block grant funding** which is directed through the farm bill and covers broad specialty crop needs not related to the COVID pandemic.

Thank you for your consideration of this letter. We look forward to working with each of your teams in the process of implementing this important funding to specialty producers across the country.

Sincerely,

United Fresh Produce Association
Western Growers
Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association
National Potato Council
US Apple Association
Texas International Produce Association
Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association
Northwest Horticultural Council
California Citrus Mutual
Cherry Marketing Institute, Inc.
National Onion Association
National Peach Council
National Potato Council
National Watermelon Association
The American Mushroom Institute
United Potato Growers of America
US Sweet Potato Council
Fresh Produce Association of the Americas
Fruit Growers Marketing Association
Idaho-Oregon Fruit and Vegetable Association
Southeast Produce Council
California Apple Commission
California Blueberry Association
California Blueberry Commission
California Farm Bureau Federation
CALIFORNIA FIG ADVISORY BOARD
California Fresh Fig Growers Association
California Fresh Fruit Association
Empire State Potato Growers
Empire State Potato Growers
Florida Citrus Mutual
Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association
Florida Strawberry Growers Association
Florida Tomato Exchange
Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Assoc.
Grower-Shipper Association of Central California
Idaho Grower Shippers Association, Inc.
Idaho Hop Growers Association
Idaho Potato Commission
Maine Potato Board

Michigan Apple Association
Michigan Blueberry Advisory Committee
Michigan Farm Bureau
New York Apple Association
North Carolina Potato Association
Northern Plains Potato Growers Association
Ohio Apple Marketing Program
Ohio Produce Growers Marketing Association
Olive Growers Council of California
Oregon Potato Commission
Pennsylvania Co-operative Potato Growers
Potato Growers of Michigan, Inc.
Texas Citrus Mutual
United Potato Growers of Idaho
Virginia Potato Board
Washington State Potato Commission
Washington State Tree Fruit Association
Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association

CC: House and Senate Agriculture Committee Leadership
President-Elect Biden Transition Team