

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington D.C. 20510

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

April 15, 2020

Dear Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, Leader Schumer, Leader McCarthy,

The public health toll of COVID-19 on so many in our nation is heart-wrenching. Congress must work to address the health crisis and protect those most at risk right now and in the months to come. Equally important, it must ensure we are prepared and resilient in the face of future crises.

Food is essential to our health and resilience, yet this pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities in our food system and supply chains that demand attention and action. Many workers in the food chain as well as independent small and mid-size farmers are being disproportionately affected by the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis. We urge Congress to act now to ensure the protections included in its legislative response are extended to the food workers and producers on the frontlines of providing the food we all need to shelter-in-place in the coming weeks and sustain us in the future.

As Congress turns its attention to investing in jobs and economic health, it must recognize the need to rebuild and grow local, sustainable food systems to support that vision. By investing in people and infrastructure to support these localized food systems, Congress can begin to improve food security, sustainability, health, and safety, as well as help address climate change.

The health of people must come first. But as agricultural relief funds are dispersed and future stimulus packages negotiated, we urge you to ensure that short-term assistance and long-term security continue to benefit people and communities, not multinational corporations and polluting agribusinesses.

Industrialized models of food production, which depend on destructive monoculture feed cropping practices and intensive fossil fuels, pesticide use and other inputs, have dominated U.S. agriculture. These models deplete natural resources through water pollution, soil erosion, biodiversity loss, and other environmental impacts, while relying on long supply chains — all of which make them more vulnerable to disruption from unanticipated events like COVID-19.

Industrial livestock production, in particular, demands an enormous amount of resources and is responsible for widespread pollution of air, land, and water. It's also a significant contributor to climate disruption, which is driving declining crop yields, unpredictable planting seasons, increases in agricultural pests and diseases, and worsening land degradation.¹

Industrial livestock production also has a profound effect on community health. Low-income communities and communities of color are particularly vulnerable, as they're more likely to live close to factory farms, slaughterhouses and processing plants. Moreover, workers in slaughter and processing plants already face high risks of injury and illness, receive low wages, and have long been denied healthcare, paid sick days, and critical workplace protections. Planned regulatory rollbacks will make these jobs even more dangerous.² Finally, industrial animal agriculture has been linked to previous pandemics and zoonotic diseases, both in the U.S. and internationally.^{3,4,5} The risk of future pandemics emerging from this system is very real.

We therefore urge that while Congress passes legislation to build a healthier, more resilient food system for all, it upholds existing environmental and worker health laws that protect people from many of these same threats.

Historically, USDA and other programs have underinvested in these more equitable, resilient systems while propping up unsustainable and exploitative industrial meat and dairy production. The U.S. Government Accountability Office opened an investigation in February into why the \$28 billion trade war bailout disproportionately benefited giant agribusinesses – such as Brazilian-owned JBS, the largest meat processor in the world – over independent small and mid-size American farmers.⁶

We urge Congress to subject all funding authorized for food and farm-related programs in current and future stimulus packages to strict Congressional oversight to ensure that this critical financial assistance supports the most vulnerable farmers and workers rather than benefiting the largest agribusinesses.

Industrial livestock production has enjoyed financial, regulatory, and other advantages over decades relative to other food producers. COVID-19 economic relief and investments should prioritize an equitable and sustainable food system, rather than a bailout for industrial livestock production. We can and must invest in the food production systems that use fewer resources, conserve water, protect biodiversity, promote soil health, and build resilience.

Specifically, we call on Congress to:

- **Prohibit industrial animal agriculture operations and corporate parents from receiving any COVID-19 bailout funding.** Financial assistance should be directed instead toward independent and small and mid-size farmers producing fruits, vegetables, and other climate-compatible plant-based foods.
- **Support small and mid-size farmers to continue producing food and keeping their farms operational** by placing a moratorium on farm foreclosures as well as expanding grant and loan programs for them. Priority for financial assistance from the USDA or other departments should be directed to those most susceptible to economic downturns, including socially disadvantaged farmers, Hispanic farmers, black farmers, indigenous farmers and other farmers of color, and those who have lost local and regional markets due to the pandemic. All farmers receiving such financial assistance should demonstrate how funds will bolster local and regional food and economic security. No COVID-19 stimulus funding or related loans should be granted to industrial animal farming operations, including concentrated animal feeding operations and slaughterhouses.
- **Protect food and farm workers** by mandating that the Occupational Safety and Health

Administration (OSHA) issue and strongly enforce an Emergency Temporary Standard to require that employers offer adequate protections for frontline 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 (PPE), clean water, and soap for washing their hands. In addition, health and safety regulations must be improved to ensure that workers at factory farms, slaughterhouses, and processing plants are protected from future risks. The USDA should also issue food and worker safety guidance to school food service workers, operators, and volunteers and provide them with PPE. Lastly, all food and farm workers should receive paid leave to ensure that they do not work when sick (or if they have symptoms of COVID-19) and have access to hazard pay, unemployment insurance, and cash grants, all regardless of immigration status.

- **Put a priority on ensuring food security and access to a range of healthy produce for those most vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19 and the dislocation it's causing**, including low-income households, the elderly, frontline health and care workers, and the millions of children now out of school who received free breakfast and lunch in schools. This should include increasing SNAP benefits and suspending rules that limit benefits, taking steps to prohibit discrimination in anti-hunger programs, urging the USDA to maintain the nationwide waiver for area eligibility for school meal programs, expanding availability of Meals on Wheels to all seniors, and supporting the continued operation of farmers markets as an essential service.
- **Oppose any efforts to weaken or waive environmental regulations for industrial agriculture**, including those that apply to factory farm and slaughterhouse pollution and pesticide use. The pandemic cannot be used as an excuse to allow violations of existing regulations and standards that protect our health, communities, and the environment. Factory farms and slaughterhouses must remain accountable to existing environmental protection laws such as the Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act and should not be allowed to increase line speeds in slaughterhouses or take other measures that can put workers and animals at increased risk. In addition, USDA must halt implementation of the New Swine and Poultry Inspection Systems as well as any beef waivers that remove caps on slaughter line speeds and allow for privatized inspections, putting public health, worker safety, animal welfare, and environmental health at risk.
- **Ensure that recovery funds provide long-term security for small farmers and invest in a just and equitable transition** that supports the health and economic security of farm workers and rural communities and protects and restores the environment. This should include financial incentives and credits, targeted extension services, and technical assistance to facilitate this transition and expand sustainable, plant-based agriculture with priority for socially disadvantaged farmers, indigenous farmers, and farmers of color.
- **Invest in public health, food security and small farmers by increasing the accessibility of plant-based foods and addressing food waste**. Bailout funds could bolster production and availability of vegetables, fruits, legumes, and grains by incentivizing an increase in plant-based options in school meals and government, hospital, and prison procurement programs. Farmers who sell in farmers' markets could also receive dedicated funds to ensure continued operations. Congress should also direct the USDA to include sustainability in the national dietary guidelines currently being revised, which shape food choices made by millions of

Americans each day and guide more than \$80 billion in federal spending every year. In addition, Congress should take steps to prevent food waste in order to reduce associated environmental impacts and support hunger relief, including asking the grocery sector to report on its food waste reduction efforts across the supply chain in response to shifting demand, pass the Food Date Labeling Act, and remove barriers to food donations.

This pandemic is a public health and economic crisis, with potential long-term consequences for food producers and workers. The recovery must create a way forward that prepares us for the next crisis by ensuring that our food system remains safe, secure, sustainable, and fair. By taking these actions, the United States can begin to move toward a more resilient and equitable food system.

Sincerely,

Center for Biological Diversity
Brighter Green
A Well-Fed World
Food Chain Workers Alliance
50by40
Farm Transformation Institute
Farm Forward
Animal Outlook
Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine
Encompass
Sentient Media
Lady Freethinker
Mobius
Fish Welfare Initiative
World Animal Protection
Physicians Association for Nutrition USA
Humane Society of the United States
Humane Society Legislative Fund
Harvard Law School Animal Law & Policy Clinic
Farm Sanctuary
Mercy For Animals
Greenbaum Foundation
Center for Climate Change and Health
Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments
Alianza Alimentaria y Acción Climática A.C.
Strategies for Ethical and Environmental Development
Center for People, Food and Environment
Farmworker Association of Florida

Greenpeace US
Government Accountability Project Food Integrity Campaign
Friends of the Earth
Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association
One Meal a Day for the Planet
Compassion in World Farming
FOUR PAWS USA
Physicians for Social Responsibility
Factory Farming Awareness Coalition
Center for a Livable Future
Food & Water Action
GreenFaith
Public Justice
Moving Animals
Center for Progressive Reform
Health Care Without Harm
The Humane League
Animal Legal Defense Fund
Center for Food Safety
ProVeg International
North Carolina Environmental Justice Network
National Employment Lawyers Association
Community Food Advocates
True Health Initiative
PlantPure Communities
Zero Hour

Endnotes

- 1 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2019). Climate Change and Land. An IPCC Special Report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems. [Mbow, H.O.P., Reisinger, A., Canadell, J. and O'Brien, P.] Retrieved from: <https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/chapter/summary-for-policymakers/>
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- 3 Shrestha, Sundar S., David L. Swerdlow, Rebekah H. Borse, Vimalanand S. Prabhu, Lyn Finelli, Charisma Y. Atkins, Kwame Owusu-Edusei et al. "Estimating the burden of 2009 pandemic influenza A (H1N1) in the United States (April 2009–April 2010)." *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 52, no. suppl_1 (2011): S75-S82.
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- 5 Humane Society of the United States. "An HSUS Report: Human Health Implications of U.S. Live Bird Markets in the Spread of Avian Influenza." 2007. Retrieved from: https://www.humanesociety.org/sites/default/files/docs/live-bird-markets-and-avian-influenza.pdf?credit=blog_em_040820_id11330
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