

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

October 30, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We write today in response to U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) recent announcement to authorize \$500 million for a fourth round of purchases for the Farmers to Families Food Box Program (FFFBP).

We appreciate USDA's attempts to provide certainty for farmers during this uncertain time, and for providing support to help address growing food insecurity needs in our state. At the same time, we have concerns with unresolved problems related to the program's third round, and the potential impact on fourth round purchases, including:

- Hunger relief agency refrigeration and storage capacity concerns,
- Ongoing last mile and administrative coordination failures,
- Food quality and selection issues,
- County-based distribution restrictions that are inconsistent with already established coordinated state-wide disaster response distribution networks,
- Lack of communication with round one and round two participants, and
- Clear preference for large corporations over local producers and non-profits

Since this program was initiated with the passage of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Washington state food bank distribution organizations, local food pantries, and farmers have noted many difficulties around the lack of partnership and coordination with USDA and contracted food distributors to meet the needs of people facing food insecurity. The third round of the FFFBP exacerbated these serious issues when it included significant alterations in distribution guidelines, leading many capable non-profits and food banks to decline further participation in the program.

The program intent is for vendors to deliver household-ready boxes of produce, meat and dairy products, or combinations thereof—ready for more convenient and immediate distribution ("off the truck and into the trunk"). As such, it is clear that **contractor and distribution guidelines need to be rewritten to require better coordination with, and service to, local and regional food security partners** to effectively support families with healthy, nutritious, fresh foods, as well as local farmers who produce that food.

Indeed, many of our state's local farmers, who participated very successfully in earlier phases of this program and have a long history of partnering with our food banks, schools and other nonprofits, have been shut out in this third round of contracts, leaving their farm businesses in dire circumstances at the peak of their productivity. Instead, multi-national distributors based outside Washington were awarded

new contracts to operate in our state with little understanding of (and no time to learn) how to build effective distribution channels or identify where needs are greatest.

The configuration of **the new pre-packed combination boxes do not meet the needs of many hunger agency partners or their clients**, and in fact, they create logistical burdens and safe food handling concerns. Each box contains a mix of non-perishable items and items that must be chilled. Since every combination box requires refrigeration, this becomes a deal breaker for most hunger relief agencies in the state, as they are already pressed for any storage capacity, let alone cold storage. Moreover, the need for maintaining temperature control makes local delivery by volunteers riskier, unless refrigerated trucks or vans are available.

In too many cases, there has been inadequate vendor communication and planning, such that some food banks receive far more perishable food than their refrigerators can accommodate, and without advanced notice. Furthermore, there are some food banks that receive un-boxed food without receiving notice that food is on the way. Without time to prepare, they are unable to bring in volunteers to put those boxes together. This adds further stress on a largely volunteer support system already long past capacity.

As noted above, third round FFFBP contracts included limitations that undermined and complicated efforts for food security partners to effectively serve their established service area – by requiring that boxes can only be distributed to vendor specific counties. **This one change fractured existing distribution networks and dramatically reduced the scale of the program in Washington state.** To make matters worse, the primary vendor was limited in their ability to send less than full-truckload quantities and is using trucks without lift-gates, thereby eliminating distribution to agencies without loading docks (which is most). In one case, a program participant went from utilizing an average of *eleven* truckloads per week when the FFFBP program began in June, to an average of *six* truckloads per week in October in order to manage the additional complexities and ensure adherence to program requirements.

In our state's most populous county, with nearly one-third of our state's residents, the number of local non-profit partners and the number of food boxes being distributed has drastically fallen in the third round. Rather than allocating FFFBP contracts for more efficient distribution across our state, the third round has resulted in an overall reduction of food allocation - despite a statewide food insecurity rate of 30% of all households, according to recent data from the University of Washington. These are not unique examples and many Washington state program participants remain deeply concerned about their ability to continue participation while effectively supporting our communities.

### **Washington State is Ready to Lead**

There is no question, quickly standing up any program is going to be challenging. However, Washington state has experienced and learned a great deal since March. We've overcome incredible obstacles by working together in new ways. That's why we want to express our strong support for programs administered at the *state level* which benefit farmers and hunger relief organizations – but importantly, take advantage of the great capacity and expertise already in place.

Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA), the state agency which administers USDA hunger relief programs, has recently implemented a pilot to provide local produce to hunger relief organizations in order to address the impacts of COVID-19 on our food insecure families and agricultural producers. WSDA has been procuring and purchasing food to support local agriculture and hunger relief statewide

for years. They buy direct from local growers and grower associations—businesses that have established relationships with their local food banks and pantries.

An "all hands approach" is needed to address our current farming and food security crisis. Support for programs like those implemented at WSDA, combined with increased state flexibility to administer federal funding for similar efforts, will benefit all states wanting to build stronger connections with agriculture and help families in need.

To be sure, we share the FFFBP goal of supporting our domestic agriculture industry and providing critical assistance to families in need. We urge USDA to work with the relevant non-profits, state agencies, and distributors to address outstanding concerns raised during the third round process. Further, we look forward to working with USDA to identify ways to advance similarly aligned state efforts, like those currently underway in Washington state.

Sincerely,



Kim Schrier, M.D.  
Member of Congress



Cathy McMorris Rodgers  
Member of Congress

**ADDITIONAL SIGNATORIES:**

Patty Murray  
United States Senator

Maria Cantwell  
United States Senator

Adam Smith  
Member of Congress

Rick Larsen  
Member of Congress

Jaime Herrera Beutler  
Member of Congress

Suzan DelBene  
Member of Congress

Denny Heck  
Member of Congress

Derek Kilmer  
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Dan Newhouse  
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Pramila Jayapal  
Member of Congress