

June 1, 2020

Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

I am writing to echo the concerns and questions raised by representatives of the U.S. Potato industry, including the Maine Potato Board, who are facing an unprecedented crisis due to COVID-19. The groups have put forth productive recommendations in regards to the USDA's Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) that warrant your full consideration. I am also requesting your assistance in helping to identify or make available USDA programs to help potato growers with the safe disposal of surplus crop.

As detailed in the attached letter, over 1.5 billion pounds of fresh potatoes are currently stuck in the supply chain due to the widespread closure of restaurants, food establishments, hospitality businesses, and schools, as well as the cancellation of large events such as concerts and fairs. While the impact to Maine's potato industry changes daily, it is estimated that more than 1,500,000 hundredweight (cwt) of potatoes from the 2019 crop may not be sold, which represents over 10 percent of the total Maine 2019 crop and is valued at over \$15 million. Furthermore, this backlog in the 2019 crop caused by the pandemic could result in growers seeing as much as a 10 to 20 percent reduction in their planting contracts for the 2020 planting season.

In years past, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program run by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service has helped Maine potato growers properly dispose of excess supply. If not adequately addressed, spoiled potatoes pose serious phytosanitary risks and environmental risks and have the potential to spawn fungal outbreaks that can harm future crop growth. We must ensure that the plight of the potato industry is not made worse by growers' inability to appropriately dispose of the crop that was unable to be sold through no fault of their own. To that end, I urge you to provide immediate technical and financial assistance to the industry and, if adequate funding is not currently available for disposal services, to offer guidance on the level of funding that might be necessary to implement these critical activities.

It is my understanding that when USDA attempted to quantify the negative effects of the pandemic on potato sales, the Department did so by analyzing retail and grocery sales, rather than those in the food service sector – where the impact has been felt most acutely. In Maine, 40 percent of our annual potato crop is comprised of processed potatoes grown expressly for use

within the food service industry. I strongly urge USDA to rectify this methodology to ensure that potatoes are fully eligible and the minimum payment levels in each category are meaningful for growers.

I am hopeful that the USDA will work closely with the U.S. potato industry to manage their backlog and to make certain that adequate direct relief is extended to producers. I stand ready to work with you toward these goals and to address their urgent disposal needs. Thank you for your time and effort on behalf of the potato industry in Maine and across the country.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator