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September 9, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Perdue:

I write to express my opposition to the Farm Service Agency's (FSA) recent changes to the Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP) and urge the agency to quickly reverse course. These unexpected adjustments to the reimbursement structure are particularly harmful to Maine's growing organic agriculture industry in the midst of a pandemic. The OCCSP has long been an invaluable tool in helping to reduce the barriers to entry into the organic marketplace, providing critical assistance to beginning and smaller-scale farmers.

As you know, FSA included an amendment to its Notice of Funding Availability for Fiscal Year 2020 OCCSP funding that altered the Congressionally-instituted reimbursement rate and maximum assistance permitted. Instead of continuing its typical reimbursement of 75 percent of eligible costs up to \$750 per scope, the FSA stated that the reimbursement rate will be reduced to 50 percent of eligible costs up to \$500 per scope. Maine farmers utilize this cost share program at a high rate, and this shift in the reimbursement structure would cause our organic producers to lose access to more than \$122,000 in 2020 alone, on top of the COVID-19-related losses they have already experienced. This change would also harm USDA-accredited Organic Certifiers, like the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, which have established payment plans with many clients and would be prevented from receiving the full amount of fees under this new structure. Organic Certifiers are essential to ensuring the integrity and success of the organic label, and weakening their standing would only threaten the sector.

Through the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (PL 115-334), Congress was clear in its intent to ensure that producers are eligible for the maximum amount of assistance as permitted by law. The 2018 law specifically provided \$24 million from the Commodity Credit Corporation to OCCSP for Fiscal Years 2019-2023, with supporting language directing USDA to utilize all available carryover funding from Fiscal Years 2014-2018 when providing certification assistance to the organic sector. Given the clear congressional intent provided in the Farm Bill, I request that FSA provide the maximum amount of assistance through OCCSP: 75 percent of eligible costs up to \$750 per scope. In addition, as FSA has stated this change is "due to the limited amount of funding available," I request that USDA provide an explanation as to the status of the funding that was dedicated for the OCCSP.

At a time of uncertainty, the USDA should be seeking to prevent any further economic harm to our agriculture producers, not creating an additional unexpected financial burden. Thank you for your

consideration of this request, and I look forward to working with the Department to ensure that the maximum amount of assistance possible is provided to organic producers through OCCSP.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Susan M. Collins". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'M'.

Susan M. Collins
United States Senator