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OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER
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AMANDA E. BEAL
COMMISSIONER

January 13, 2021

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

Dear Secretary Perdue,

Thank you for your ongoing support to help ensure that farmers and families across the country have access to essential programs at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). We recognize that when the pandemic emerged a year ago, it was no easy feat to create and implement the Farmers to Families Food Box (FFFB) program. With that said, after having observed four rounds of FFFB contracting and implementation, we recommend the following improvements to enhance the efficacy and impact of the program. These recommendations, outlined below, are in addition to the recommendations submitted recently by the Northeastern Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NEASDA) Commissioners, which we also support.

- Clarify and broaden the program's scoring criteria. Cost is always an important consideration but needs to be balanced with a demonstrated ability to equitably and efficiently operate a program. For example, in a state like Maine with lower population and higher distribution costs, foregrounding price alone disadvantages local companies and limits the potential impact of the program.
- Implement systems to help ensure that Maine vendors and producers are given a fair opportunity to participate. No Maine-based food distributor was included in program contracts in Rounds 1, 3 and 4, which also means that Maine's farmers largely did not have an opportunity to benefit from the program, as food was being purchased and aggregated in other states.
- Ensure that food boxes are distributed equitably across the country and within each state. Although data is not yet readily available, we have received reports of uneven distribution in our state. It's important that distribution formulas follow clear and equitable models that serve everyone.

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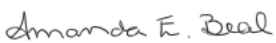
- Utilize existing infrastructure and allocate more resources to established USDA programs to enable states to scale up pilot models that utilize local food and engage with local farms. For example, the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) Farm-to-Pantry funding is one way to incorporate local food at a modest scale. Additionally, allowing states to allocate a percentage of the federal food budget to purchase local produce and cover related costs would be a win-win for the TEFAP program and farmers.

Beyond these general considerations, we are specifically requesting that Maine-based food distributors be included in Round 5 of FFFB contract awards. As we have pointed out in previous communications, Maine's unique geography and demography are challenging to those not familiar with our state and its people. We are comparatively older. There are relatively few of us, and we are spread out over a wide area—an area roughly equal to the rest of New England combined. While other vendors may check the right boxes on paper, it has been Maine-based distributors, rooted in Maine communities, who have been the most well-positioned to rapidly and effectively coordinate with local partners to broadly distribute the boxes throughout the state and best serve Maine families relying on this program.

As previously noted, to date, only Round 2 included Maine-based contractors. Not surprisingly, Round 2 has been the most successful from the perspective of recipient satisfaction, acceptance of food offerings, efficiency and uptake of distribution, and in providing economic benefit to Maine farmers. Two Maine vendors are eligible for the upcoming 5th Round of the program, as they were for the previous two but passed over by the USDA for out of state contractors. We are confident that if they are selected in this Round, it will help to ensure that Maine residents can be best served by the FFFB program during this challenging time.

We ask that you reevaluate the contractor selection process and include a Maine distributor (or distributors) in the program's fifth and all subsequent contract awards. Mainers have demonstrated the ability to participate in and distribute food boxes collaboratively and effectively throughout the state and should be given the opportunity to implement the FFFB program once again.

Sincerely,



Amanda Beal
Commissioner
Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry