

Urgent Policy Actions are Needed to Protect and Secure US Food and Farm Systems Affected by COVID-19

Policy Recommendations from the Union of Concerned Scientists

The COVID-19 pandemic and its growing economic fallout are revealing many cracks in the US economy, the nation's food and farm systems, and its social safety nets for the most vulnerable individuals and families. Congress has taken initial steps to respond to the novel coronavirus in ways that protect people from immediate harm, but more investment is needed to protect and secure US food and farm systems during this pandemic and in its aftermath.

As Congress crafts additional legislation amid the unfolding public health and economic crises, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) seeks new investments and solutions, particularly at the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), to help food producers, workers, and eaters. These include streamlined and equitable nutrition assistance; additional health, safety, and economic protections for farmers and all food chain workers; and strategic rapid-response investments in federal food and agricultural research related to COVID-19.

Informed by the food systems, public health, and economic expertise of our team and in consultation with key partners, we have compiled the following set of detailed recommendations calling on Congress to:

- **Provide additional emergency nutrition assistance to support families and stimulate the economy, through:**
 - Emergency changes and flexibilities in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
 - Continued cash assistance to households with greatest need
 - Emergency provisions and increased funding for school nutrition programs
- **Guarantee essential protections for essential food and farm workers, through:**
 - Pandemic premium pay increases
 - Better enforcement of health and safety protections
 - Improved access to testing, health care, paid sick leave, and family medical leave
 - Expanded benefits for food and farm workers
- **Support local and regional food economies, through:**
 - Additional resources and emergency flexibilities for existing local and regional food programs
 - New emergency programs to help farmers and food producers cope with the crisis
- **Fix funding gaps at the USDA to support valuable COVID-19 related research, education, and extension, through:**
 - Funding for fast-tracked COVID-19 related research and funding for research staff

Emergency nutrition assistance to support families and stimulate the economy

The scale of the health and economic crises caused by the coronavirus pandemic requires swift activation and streamlining of nutrition and other assistance programs to help protect millions of families and children from sudden and severe financial instability and food insecurity. Programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) program can also generate additional spending that can help stabilize the economy. SNAP benefits are among the most effective forms of economic stimulus, with US Department of Agriculture (USDA) models estimating that an increase of \$1 billion in SNAP expenditures during an economic recession increases economic activity by \$1.79 billion, and can simultaneously help address challenges being encountered within diverse sectors of the food system.^{1,2}

Following are priority requests for future stimulus packages to address the many challenges that families and individuals across the United States are facing:

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – Congress should require the USDA to increase benefit levels, maintain eligibility, and implement program flexibilities, as follows:

- **Increase SNAP maximum household benefits by no less than 15 percent and raise SNAP minimum household benefits from \$16 to \$30.** Though the Families First Coronavirus Response (FFCRA) Act authorized USDA to provide additional emergency benefits, this increase is capped at the maximum benefit for household size. To better support families and ensure an influx of spending into state and local economies, benefit caps must be increased to support all SNAP households, nearly 40 percent of which already receive maximum benefits. This approach is consistent with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which mandated higher monthly benefits for SNAP recipients and increased maximum monthly benefit levels by 13.6 percent.³
- **Suspend all rulemaking underway that would render SNAP less effective in serving target populations.** This includes Revision of Categorical Eligibility in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (FNS–2018–0037), Standardization of State Heating and Cooling Standard Utility Allowances (FNS-2019-0009), and Inadmissibility on Public Charge Grounds (USCIS-2010-0012) (implemented on February 24, 2020). All of these proposed rules were developed, and public comments solicited, during circumstances

¹ Hanson, K. 2010. The Food Assistance National Input-Output Multiplier (FANIOM) Model and Stimulus Effects of SNAP. Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture. Economic Research Report Number 103. https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/44748/7996_err103_1_.pdf

² Reinhardt, Sarah. “SNAP is a boon to urban and rural economies—and small-town stores may not survive cuts.” *The Equation* (blog). May 14, 2018. <https://blog.ucsusa.org/sarah-reinhardt/snap-is-a-boon-to-urban-and-rural-economies-and-small-town-stores-may-not-survive-cuts>

³ US Department of Agriculture. Memorandum: SNAP Provisions of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. February 23, 2009. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/snap/SNAP%20Provisions%20of%20ARRA.pdf>

drastically different than those at present, and they would exacerbate hunger and hardship among already vulnerable populations.^{4,5,6,7,8}

- **Ensure COVID-19 aid does not render SNAP less effective.** Household financial support provided by current and future stimulus packages passed in direct response to COVID-19, including cash assistance and unemployment benefits, should not reduce household SNAP benefits or render otherwise eligible households ineligible for SNAP benefits.
- **Expand state permissions to utilize SNAP benefits in e-commerce nationwide.** First authorized in the Agricultural Act of 2014, SNAP online purchasing pilots are now authorized in Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Nebraska, New York, Oregon, and Washington through retailers Amazon, ShopRite, Walmart, and Wright's Markets.⁹ Expanding SNAP online purchasing options to all states through approved retailers will help reduce the spread of COVID-19 by allowing more individuals to remain at home and limiting crowd sizes at stores.¹⁰ Quick work to approve new retailers, including small and mid-sized farmers and food producers who have traditionally served SNAP participants through farmers markets, farm stands, and on-farm markets; provide greater flexibility for SNAP EBT payment for Community Supported Agriculture shares; and develop other innovative models for allowing EBT payment for grocery deliveries could benefit low-income families as well as local and regional food economies.^{11,12}
- **Allow SNAP participants to utilize benefits to purchase prepared or hot foods.** The USDA has routinely waived regulations prohibiting the purchase of prepared or hot foods with SNAP benefits in the aftermath of disaster.¹³ This provides another avenue to help families and individuals quickly access needed food and an additional revenue stream for retail operations. Multiple states have also asked that restaurants be authorized to accept SNAP benefits for takeout meals, which could provide a vital lifeline to an industry

⁴ Reinhardt, Sarah. "Nine reasons to oppose the Trump administration's proposed SNAP changes." *The Equation* (blog). March 29, 2019. <https://blog.ucsusa.org/sarah-reinhardt/nine-reasons-to-oppose-the-trump-administrations-proposed-snap-changes>

⁵ Kwon, D. N. Joo, and E. Waxman. 2020. *Using Labor Market Areas to Determine ABAWD Waiver Eligibility Limits SNAP's Local Flexibility*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/101940/using-labor-market-areas-to-determine-abawd-eligibility-limits-snaps-local-flexibility_1.pdf

⁶ Reinhardt, Sarah. "Trump administration sidesteps Congress to cut SNAP. Again." *The Equation* (blog). August 1, 2019. <https://blog.ucsusa.org/sarah-reinhardt/trump-administration-sidesteps-congress-to-cut-snap-again>

⁷ Reinhardt, Sarah. "Trump's newest SNAP rule will leave families in the cold." *The Equation* (blog). November 26, 2019. <https://blog.ucsusa.org/sarah-reinhardt/trumps-newest-snap-rule-will-leave-families-in-cold>

⁸ Reinhardt, Sarah. "The dinner table is the latest battleground for Trump's attacks on immigrant families." *The Equation* (blog). November 9, 2018. <https://blog.ucsusa.org/sarah-reinhardt/trumps-latest-attacks-on-immigrant-families>

⁹ US Department of Agriculture. FNS Launches the Online Purchasing Pilot. April 6, 2020. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/online-purchasing-pilot>

¹⁰ Crampton, Liz. "USDA pressured to allow more SNAP recipients order online groceries." *Politico Pro*. April 7, 2020. <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2020/04/usda-pressured-to-allow-more-snap-recipients-order-online-groceries-1911830>

¹¹ Reinhardt, Sarah. "Coronavirus aid must help farmers keep foothold in local food economies." March 20, 2020. *The Equation* (blog). <https://blog.ucsusa.org/sarah-reinhardt/coronavirus-aid-must-help-farmers-keep-foothold-in-local-food-economies>

¹² Office of Senator Bob Casey (D-PA). Press Release: Action Needed to Allow SNAP Recipients to Get Home Delivery of Groceries During Coronavirus Outbreak; Casey Calls for Immediate Solutions. March 19, 2020. <https://www.casey.senate.gov/newsroom/releases/action-needed-to-allow-snap-recipients-to-get-home-delivery-of-groceries-during-coronavirus-outbreak-casey-calls-for-immediate-solutions>

¹³ US Department of Agriculture. Press Release: USDA Provides Additional Food Options to SNAP Participants Impacted by Hurricane Florence. September 17, 2018. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pressrelease/2018/018618>

forecasting a loss of at least \$225 billion and as many as 7 million jobs over the course of the next three months.^{14,15}

Continued cash assistance to households with greatest need – Cash assistance should be considered a key tool to alleviate economic instability and food insecurity among those who are recently jobless or underemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁶ While SNAP benefits help people purchase food, these benefits do not allow for the purchase other essential supplies such as medications, diapers, cleaning products, and home-school supplies. Further, evaluation of food spending among SNAP households indicates that even current SNAP benefit levels are insufficient to help people meet all of their food needs.¹⁷

To ensure that additional cash assistance reaches those most in need, such benefits should be targeted at households with one or more unemployed members or households meeting income thresholds for existing federal assistance programs such as Medicaid, SNAP, or WIC. Moreover, these benefits must not be conditioned on household immigration status, meaning distribution should not rely on the use of Social Security numbers for tax payments.

School nutrition programs – The USDA has granted state waivers to enable safer distribution of meals while schools and daycare facilities are closed, but further changes to the National School Lunch Program, National School Breakfast Program, Summer Food Service Program, and Child and Adult Care Food Program are needed to bolster food security and nutrition for families affected by the crisis. Congress should:

- **Permit schools to serve some items in bulk to meet simplified weekly meal pattern requirements, and provide funding based on food inventory rather than per-meal reimbursement.** Although school food service providers have been granted flexibility to offer multiple days' worth of meals at one time, many report being unable to purchase and store the needed quantities of individual food items, such as single-serving fruit or vegetable packages and cartons of milk, required for multiple days' worth of reimbursable meals for all eligible children. Program flexibilities that would allow food service providers to meet simplified weekly meal pattern requirements by serving some items in bulk, rather than individually packaged (for example, one gallon of milk in place of 16 single-serving cartons), would expedite meal preparation, packaging, and service while alleviating administrative burdens. Simplified weekly meal pattern requirements should closely follow current meal patterns to the extent possible, providing adequate amounts of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, milk, and protein, and prioritize foods in fresh or minimally processed form. Under this model, schools should be reimbursed not based on individual meals served, but rather on total inventory of food purchased.

¹⁴ Gangitano, Alex. "Restaurant industry estimates \$225B in losses from coronavirus." The Hill. March 18, 2020.

<https://thehill.com/business-a-lobbying/business-a-lobbying/488223-restaurant-industry-estimates-225b-in-losses-from>

¹⁵ Geske, Robyn. "Officials ask for SNAP benefits to be allowed at restaurants." KWTX. March 26, 2020.

<https://www.kwtx.com/content/news/Officials-ask-for-SNAP-benefits-to-be-allowed-at-restaurants--569119481.html>

¹⁶ Currie, J. and Gahvari, F. 2008. Transfers in Cash and In-Kind Theory Meets the Data. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 46:2, 333-383 available online at: <https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/jel.46.2.333>

¹⁷ Tiehen, L., Newman, C., Kirlin, J.A. 2017. The Food-Spending Patterns of Households Participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Findings From USDA's FoodAPS, US Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, available online at: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/84780/eib-176.pdf?v=0>

- **Require the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to coordinate with the USDA and support meal distribution during the pandemic, as requested by school districts.** The pandemic has presented school food service operations with major logistical challenges that necessitate additional support and the use of emergency feeding models. Depending on the needs and requests of individual school districts, FEMA may provide assistance, including but not limited to traffic direction at meal sites, volunteer recruitment and coordination, and transportation and meal distribution needs. To the extent possible, FEMA should help increase distribution of food directly to households and coordinate with other emergency feeding providers such as food banks and pantries.
- **Ensure that all food service providers receive health and safety guidance and adequate personal protective equipment.** School meal distribution sites are becoming increasingly vital community resources—with some districts serving more meals than area soup kitchens—putting workers and volunteers at greater risk of exposure as they work to manage high-traffic sites.¹⁸ It is essential that the USDA act quickly to issue food and worker safety guidance to school food service workers, operators and volunteers, and to provide them with personal protective equipment and other needed protections. Though the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act includes money for schools to purchase cleaning and sanitation supplies, which can include personal protective equipment for food service workers, the federal government must be explicit that school food service programs are eligible to utilize this funding.
- **Extend the Pandemic-Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) through the summer and permit additional P-EBT distribution sites.** Widespread business closures and mounting health impacts of COVID-19 have made it increasingly difficult for low-income families to afford food, and school food authorities are struggling to meet the demand. With social distancing guidelines in place and more workers losing jobs, Congress should expand P-EBT benefits through the summer. Schools, emergency feeding providers, and food assistance workers could help distribute P-EBT cards. P-EBT eases the burden on already-reeling school food authorities, allows families to purchase the foods that meet their needs, and can reduce the number of trips outside the home. Most importantly, like SNAP, P-EBT reduces hunger while infusing much-needed capital into the economy.
- **Increase funding and flexibility for schools to purchase more fruits, vegetables, and dairy products from farmers and producers with surplus.** As major produce buyers such as restaurants shut down and consumers shift a majority of their food purchases to grocery stores, many farmers and food producers have been left with an abundance of products.¹⁹ Directing more school funds to purchase some of this surplus, particularly from local and regional farmers and producers, can help alleviate financial strain on farmers, reduce food waste, and ensure schools have fresh food to use and distribute.
- **Provide emergency funding relief for schools to cover additional costs incurred during the pandemic.** Many school food service operations report that the current circumstances have led to

¹⁸ Nittle, Nadra. “With schools closed, some districts are feeding more people than food banks.” *Civil Eats*. April 7, 2020. <https://civileats.com/2020/04/07/with-schools-closed-some-districts-are-feeding-more-people-than-food-banks/>

¹⁹ Behsudi, Adam and Ryan McCrimmon. “Food goes to waste amid coronavirus crisis.” *Politico*. April 5, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/05/food-waste-coronavirus-pandemic-164557>

increased costs—for example, in the form of hazard pay for school food service workers and delivery costs for students and families who are unable to pick up meals—at the same time their revenue has decreased due to reduced meal participation during school closures. Such unanticipated shortfalls have forced districts to tap into fund balances and draw upon lines of credit. In order to sustain these essential feeding programs while protecting jobs and district educational funds, funding must be provided to keep school meal programs financially solvent.

- **Ease the administrative burden for school food service programs as they transition back in the next school year.** Large numbers of children will be newly eligible for free or reduced-priced school meals when school year 2020-2021 starts. Providing meals at no cost for all enrolled students will help program finances as they recover from losses from the pandemic and mitigate the time and resources that would otherwise be needed to process many new applications.

Guaranteeing essential protections for essential food and farm workers

A majority of the workers who grow, package, distribute, prepare, and sell our food are considered essential by the federal government, and therefore many are working during this crisis and more vulnerable to infection.²⁰ Prior to the pandemic, the food and agricultural sectors employed one of every seven workers nationwide; paid these workers a lower hourly median wage than frontline workers in any other industry; and failed to provide them with the necessary health, safety, and financial protections afforded to workers in other sectors.²¹ Now, as COVID-19 spreads across the country, as many as 7 million restaurant service and kitchen workers are expected to lose their jobs during the next three months, while workers in farming and food retail remain employed but at greater risk of exposure and illness.^{14,22} Many farmworkers, in particular, receive inadequate information and protections, while also lacking access to benefits such as health care and paid sick leave.²³ About half of these workers are undocumented, meaning many will be ineligible for federal financial aid such as stimulus checks already offered in FFCRA.

Farmers, farmworkers, and other food workers should be classified as “first responders” and be provided additional pay and protections to ensure their safety and the stability of the US food supply during this crisis. Congress should require:

Pandemic premium pay increases – Essential food and farm workers should receive immediate pandemic pay increases. Frontline food and farm workers (including but not limited to workers employed at farms, production and processing plants, warehouses, distribution centers, and retail stores) should be provided immediate pay increases, such as those described in the proposed “Heroes Fund,” as compensation for increased risk in performing essential work.²⁴ At a minimum, pay should be provided at a premium of time and a half and must be extended to all essential food and farm workers, regardless

²⁰ Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. Memorandum on identification of essential critical infrastructure workers during COVID-19 response. March 28, 2020. <https://www.cisa.gov/publication/guidance-essential-critical-infrastructure-workforce>

²¹ Food Chain Workers Alliance and Solidarity Research Cooperative (FCWA/SRC). 2016. No piece of the pie: US food workers in 2016. Los Angeles, CA: Food Chain Workers Alliance. http://foodchainworkers.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/FCWA_NoPieceOfThePie_P.pdf

²² Reinhardt, Sarah. “Pandemic exposes plight of food workers who have long fought for justice.” *The Equation* (blog). March 27, 2020. <https://blog.ucsusa.org/sarah-reinhardt/pandemic-exposes-plight-of-food-workers-who-have-long-fought-for-justice>

²³ <https://fortune.com/2020/04/03/farmworkers-coronavirus-essential-workers-covid-19-agriculture/>

²⁴ Senate Democrats. “The COVID-19 ‘Heroes Fund.’” No date. Available online at: <https://www.democrats.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Heroes%20Fund%20FINAL%204.7.20.pdf>

of immigration status, to ensure retention of the work force and security of the US food supply. Congress must also expressly reject any attempts to reduce pay for farm workers employed through the H-2A program.²⁵

Enforcement of health and safety protections – The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) should:

- **Issue and strongly enforce an Emergency Temporary Standard to mandate that employers offer adequate protections for frontline food chain workers and others at risk, and Congress should provide OSHA with commensurate funds to implement this mandate.** This includes monitoring and enforcement of existing worker safety standards and COVID-19 guidance such as education and training on minimizing exposure risk and workplace safety protocols in appropriate languages; provision of personal protective equipment and adequate access to soap and water; and the ability to report violations without fear of retaliation. In the case of farmworkers, many of whom are at increased risk of exposure due to working and living conditions in close proximity to others, recent informal polls conducted by United Farm Workers found that 90% of respondents had received no guidance or training from employers on how to protect themselves from COVID-19.²⁶
- **Reinstate requirements for all employers to record and report coronavirus cases among workers.** The administration's recent guidance stating that most employers outside health care and emergency response are no longer required to record and report COVID-19 cases among workers must be rescinded immediately.²⁷ This requirement is intended to help identify and track cases and implement effective worker protections, and its repeal may put many food and farm workers, as well as other members of the general public, at greater risk of contracting the illness and hinder efforts to contain its spread nationwide.

Improved access to testing, health care, paid sick leave, and family medical leave – Congress should provide free COVID-19 testing and treatment regardless of immigration status and expand paid sick days and family and medical leave to employers of all sizes. Priority free COVID-19 testing and treatment should be made available to farmworkers and other food chain workers, regardless of immigration status, given their increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 and their importance to the stability of the US food supply. Though FFCRA extends paid sick leave to many workers, employers with 500 or more employees are exempt, excluding an estimated 2 million workers at grocery stores and nearly 3 million workers at general merchandise stores that sell groceries.²⁸ Additionally, FFCRA allows businesses with fewer than 50 employees to apply for exemption from providing leave for reasons of school closure or lack of childcare, without providing any documentation of how they meet criteria for exemption. Ninety-seven percent of farms have fewer than 50 employees, and their employees account for 64 percent of farmworkers, who would potentially be denied from access to paid sick leave and

²⁵ Ordoñez, Franco. "White House Seeks To Lower Farmworker Pay To Help Agriculture Industry." National Public Radio. April 10, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/10/832076074/white-house-seeks-to-lower-farmworker-pay-to-help-agriculture-industry>

²⁶ Sherman, Jocelyn. 2020. "UFW to All Growers, Ag Groups: 'Imperative to Take Proactive Steps' to Ensure Farm Worker Safety—Starting with Extending Sick Pay." UFW (blog). March 17, 2020. <https://ufw.org/covidopenltr/>.

²⁷ Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Enforcement Guidance for Recording Cases of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). Memorandum. April 10, 2020. Washington, DC: United States Department of Labor. <https://www.osha.gov/memos/2020-04-10/enforcement-guidance-recording-cases-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19>

²⁸ Fowers, Alyssa and Shelly Tan. "The new sick leave law doesn't help the workers that need it most." *Washington Post*. March 19, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/sick-leave-workers-coronavirus/>

family medical leave needed to care for their children.²⁹ To protect the farming labor force and food supply, the federal government should provide immediate financial support to farms with fewer than 50 employees who may otherwise be unable to afford to provide paid sick and family and medical leave.

Expanded benefits for food and farm workers – Congress should ensure that all food and farm workers—regardless of immigration status—are eligible to receive state benefits such as cash assistance, unemployment insurance, and childcare subsidies, and have the right to organize in collective bargaining units. These workers are critical to ensuring that all people can meet their food needs, and they should be afforded the same benefits as other workers in our country. Congress should also do more to support newly unemployed food and farm workers by expanding the number of weeks that workers are eligible for unemployment benefits. Financial support can be provided in ways, such as the emergency assistance grant program, that are accessible to all food and farm workers, regardless of their immigration status.

Supporting local and regional food economies

Local and regional food markets are economically important across the United States, and are especially critical for beginning farmers, farmers of color, limited-resource farmers, and veteran farmers, who disproportionately utilize these market channels to feed their communities and build diversified farm incomes. The Congressional Research Service estimated local food sales at \$11.8 billion in 2017, with nearly 8 percent of US farms and ranches (159,000 operations) participating.^{30,31} Direct-to-consumer food sales alone in the U.S. totaled \$2.8 billion in 2017.³¹ Key local and regional food markets are estimated to lose more than \$1.02 billion in sales from March to December due to the short and long-term impacts of the pandemic.³² In addition, many farms are dealing with unexpected expenses just to stay in business, including infrastructure and technology investments related to new delivery models and safety and sanitation improvements made necessary due to COVID-19.

Increased program funding and flexibilities are needed to help local and regional farmers and food producers adapt to changing circumstances and continue to serve their communities. These include:

Resources and flexibilities for existing local and regional food programs – Congress should:

- **Provide emergency resources and flexibilities to the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) to expand Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP) grants and establish cooperative agreements to keep farmers markets and food hubs operational.** Local food organizations that help to run farmers markets or food hubs are working to rapidly adopt new models to deliver farmers' products to consumers. Providing AMS with additional resources and permitting more flexibility when implementing existing Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program

²⁹ Costa, Daniel, and Philip Martin. 2020. "Nine in 10 Farmworkers Could Be Covered by the Paid Leave Provisions of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act—but Not If Smaller Employers Are Exempted." Economic Policy Institute (blog). March 31, 2020. <https://www.epi.org/blog/9-in-10-farmworkers-could-be-covered-by-the-paid-leave-provisions-of-the-families-first-coronavirus-response-act-but-not-if-smaller-employers-are-exempted>

³⁰ Johnson, R. 2019. 2018 Farm Bill Primer: Support for Local Food Systems. Congressional Research Service IF11252. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/IF11252.pdf>

³¹ U.S. Department of Ag, National Ag Statistics Service, 2017 Census of Agriculture. U.S. Department of Ag, National Ag Statistics Service, 2017 Census of Agriculture.

³² National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. "COVID-19 Economic Impact on Local Food Markets." NSAC Blog. March 23, 2020. <https://sustainableagriculture.net/blog/covid-economic-impact-local-food/>

projects, including waiving cash matches and regranting authority, will help the USDA best support local and regional market operators.

- **Provide emergency resources and flexibilities to use Value Added Producer Grants (VAPG) for market rebuilding projects.** Future stimulus packages must provide additional funding for VAPG grants, give the USDA the authority to waive or reduce matching grant requirements for VAPG grants in FY21, and allow for "market rebuilding" projects in addition to "emerging market" and "market expansion" projects in FY21. Currently, regulations allow for only emerging market projects (feasibility studies or working capital) and market expansion projects (feasibility or working capital), and thus need to be altered.
- **Provide increased funding for the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) and waive its matching requirement.** Formerly known as the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive program, GusNIP helps SNAP participants increase fruit and vegetable purchases while supporting farmers. Increasing funding for this program, while temporarily waiving requirements for matching funding, will strengthen its ability to serve low-income families and local farmers and food producers during the pandemic.
- **Waive matching fund requirements for the Farm to School Grant Program.** The Farm to School Grant Program, which awards competitive grants to improve school access to local foods, requires that grant recipients have matching support of at least 25 percent of the total project budget. Temporarily waiving matching requirements for Farm to School grants will increase schools' abilities to surmount pressing challenges related to the pandemic, including purchasing surpluses of local produce and providing adequate training and technical assistance to strengthen farm to school supply chains.

Emergency programs to help farmers and food producers cope with the crisis – Congress should provide emergency funding to small and midsize farmers, food processors, farmers markets and food hubs to assist their efforts to adopt new practices in response to COVID-19. Local food sales are declining as social distancing limits person to person transactions and farmers are responding by adopting new processes, packaging and delivery models. Establishing a national COVID-19 response grant program will assist food producers and handlers of agricultural products—such as small meat processors, farmer's markets, and food hubs—in covering the costs of new practices and equipment to adhere to public health guidance in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Fixing funding gaps at the USDA to support valuable COVID-19 related research, education, and extension

The most recent stimulus package to pass Congress, the CARES Act, included over \$1 billion for research and related activities at several federal science agencies to help the US response to COVID-19, but food and agriculture research at the USDA was not among them. This gap in funding must be addressed, especially given that USDA-supported research has been immediately instrumental in tackling past outbreaks and is essential to the US response and recovery from COVID-19.

Battling the COVID-19 global pandemic requires an “all hands on deck” approach by the science community that includes USDA working alongside other federal agencies like the National Science Foundation (NSF), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Department of Energy, the National Institutes of Health, and the US Forest Service.

The USDA’s research, education and extension activities can play a powerful role in addressing the wide-ranging impacts that the novel coronavirus is having on the food and farm system, including those on farmers and ranchers, the food supply chain, household food choices, and nutrition assistance programs. Furthermore, the USDA has a long history of harnessing the scientific power of the nation’s universities and colleges to improve our understanding infectious diseases and to curb their impact.³³

For example, USDA-supported intramural and extramural research on coronaviruses in poultry, cattle, and pigs, as well as diagnostic testing and vaccine development, has provided a strong foundation for fighting COVID-19.³⁴ More USDA research could be directly relevant to treating the disease, developing vaccines, and preparing for the future.

Furthermore, additional research, education and extension initiatives across the USDA are crucial to understanding and communicating challenges and opportunities across the food and farm system. Such efforts are essential in rapidly changing and uncertain times, and necessary to enabling and supporting resiliency. Ensuring that the food and agriculture research workforce, both within and external to the USDA is maintained and protected as much as possible, is also crucial. USDA research staff, as well as those funded by National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) at institutions across the country, conduct essential short and long-term research on various ongoing issues facing our food and farm system. These research projects must be protected from major disruptions due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States. Protections should include emergency financial support for research teams that are most impacted by COVID-19, including funding to rapidly rebuild and support staff and programs during the pandemic recovery.

³³ U.S. Department of Agriculture. National Institute of Food and Agriculture Impacts. <https://nifa.usda.gov/impacts>

³⁴ Saif, Linda J. Animal Coronaviruses: Lessons for SARS. In: Institute of Medicine Forum on Microbial Threats, Knobler S, et al., editors. Learning from SARS: Preparing for the Next Disease Outbreak. Washington, DC: National Academies Press; 2004

Immediate investments in USDA food and agricultural research – Congress should:

- **Provide \$75 million to create a new program priority area in the National Institute of Food and Agriculture's (NIFA) Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) for Critical Agriculture Grants to support USDA's response to coronavirus.** The CARES Act provided \$75 million to the NSF to fast-track grants supporting urgent research into better understanding the cellular, physiological, and ecological aspects of the novel coronavirus, and a similar amount of funding should be allocated to NIFA to develop such a priority program. Such funds should invest in fast-track research, education and extension on the biologic, social, economic, and environmental implications of coronavirus in food and agriculture systems and markets. Currently NIFA, the USDA's extramural research agency, has no means to rapidly seek, internally review, and award funding to support critical research on rapidly emerging issues. This new competitive grant program would allow NIFA to provide immediate and focused solutions to address emergency situations in food and agriculture markets locally, regionally, and nationally. The program should explicitly address the immediate needs and challenges facing US food and agriculture as a result of rapidly emerging threats like the novel coronavirus. Such a program should prioritize beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers, given their vulnerabilities to market shocks. The program also should prioritize research and activities related to sustainable agriculture and projects developed in partnership with farmers (such as the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Extension Partnership grants) to ensure relevancy of research to the immediate issues farmers are facing. This will also help ensure that farmers are building long-term resilience to challenges such as climate change.
- **Provide \$30 million to support and expand NIFA's Tactical Sciences Initiative.** This initiative can provide essential solutions to coronavirus challenges to crop and livestock producers that are critically important to our nation's trade and economic well-being. The Tactical Sciences for Agricultural Biosecurity program area priority of AFRI focuses on increasing national capacity to prevent, rapidly detect, and respond to biologic threats to US agriculture and the food supply. Supported activities are aimed at increasing agricultural biosecurity at the regional and national levels, and across the public and private sectors. At present, the program supports detection and diagnostics of transboundary and emerging pests and diseases associated with animal and plant production systems; however, key elements of US food systems are not addressed. Expansion of the initiative should include biologic risks and their impact on the continuity and management of the food system. It should also include biological threats to farmers and farmworkers, biosecurity and worker health and safety protocols in food processing, and threats that COVID-19 poses for food handling, distribution, and transportation.
- **Provide \$25 million for the USDA-Supported Extension Disaster Education Network.** The Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN) is a collaborative national effort by land-grant universities and Cooperative Extension Services across the country, administered by NIFA to improve the delivery of services to citizens affected by disasters. Its mission is to build working relationships with local and state emergency management networks, provide educational programs on disaster preparation and mitigation, assume locally appropriate roles during disasters, and collaborate in recovery efforts. In recent years, member institutions of EDEN have taken on increasing roles to improve quality of life and responses in limited-resource farming communities, where disaster often hits hardest. Additional funds for this program are needed to help farmers and their communities manage their food businesses as the supply chain is disrupted, and if they, their employees, or communities are infected with the virus.

- **Provide \$10 million for the Economic Research Service (ERS) to assess the agronomic, economic, social, and food-supply chain issues that are arising as a result of COVID-19.** The current crisis will have economic consequences across the entire food and agriculture system. Research on those impacts now can help stabilize the food system during the pandemic and help inform recovery efforts. ERS’s mission—conducting “high-quality, objective economic research to inform and enhance public and private decision making” of issues in agriculture, food, the environment, and rural communities—is precisely what is needed at this time. ERS researchers can evaluate COVID-19 impacts on everything from food prices and household food expenditures to food insecurity rates and utilization of nutrition assistance programs. Such analyses can be used by policymakers to craft additional legislation to address challenges that the pandemic is creating for families across the United States. ERS researchers are also well-equipped to assess COVID-19 impacts on farm prices and incomes, planting and other management decisions, food trade, rural economies, and food manufacturing and food safety issues. There would also be value to having economists at ERS work in partnership with agencies across the USDA to conduct interdisciplinary research on how COVID-19 is impacting the food system broadly.
- **Provide \$10 million to maintain, adapt, and/or rebuild staff and projects for ongoing USDA intramural research projects and activities disrupted by COVID-19.** We ask that the Agriculture Research Service, the Economic Research Service, and the National Agricultural Statistics Service receive funding to continue data collection and other activities for any projects that are disrupted by the pandemic due to lab closures, travel restrictions, and other health and safety measures.³⁵ Congress must provide funding to support disrupted research projects to ensure projects can be continued or completed.

Conclusion

UCS strongly encourages Congress to incorporate the policies recommended in this document in future stimulus and response packages as soon as possible, in order to mitigate negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on farmers, ranchers, and our nation’s food security and food supply. These policies are critical to ensuring that our most vulnerable populations are supported, and that the workers who are the foundation of our farm and food system have the health and safety protections they need and deserve. Furthermore, investments in agriculture research are directly relevant to helping the US federal government better understand, contain, and respond to disruptions caused by the pandemic.

In addition, as Congress anticipates passing future stimulus packages this year, it should plan for longer-term investments that can build resilience to future challenges and crises. These must include investments in natural infrastructure, which will directly support farmers and rural communities, and help to ensure a resilient and sustainable food and farm system for years to come. UCS will provide further recommendations to this end in the coming days and weeks.

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³⁵ <https://www.ars.usda.gov/pacific-west-area/davis-ca/whnrc/>