

May 11, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Chairman, Senate Appropriations Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations
Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Pat Roberts
Chairman, Senate Agriculture Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Ranking Member, Senate Agriculture
Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Nita Lowey
House Appropriations Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kay Granger Chairwoman,
Ranking Member, House Appropriations
Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Collin Peterson
Chairman, House Agriculture Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable K. Michael Conaway
Ranking Member, House Agriculture
Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressional Leaders:

Sustainable Agriculture and Food System Funders (SAFSF) is the leading national network for philanthropic grantmakers and mission-based investors working in support of just and sustainable food and agriculture systems. Our members include community and corporate foundations, private foundations, health conversion foundations, investment organizations, individual donors and investors, and more. SAFSF members make investments at local, regional, state, Tribal, national, and international levels to support activities and strategies related to justice, farms and farming systems, environmental sustainability, markets, health, agricultural products, and much more within the food system.

The coronavirus pandemic has made it impossible for anyone in America to ignore the problems in our country's food system. These problems are not new, but the ripple effects of the pandemic have exacerbated existing problems to the point where they have created serious threats to the ability of everyday people to feed themselves and their families. This moment in time calls for both immediate relief to meet the scale of this crisis and long-term structural solutions to make our food supply more equitable and resilient for the future.

The SAFSF members signing this letter are taking this opportunity to share what we have learned from the

farmers and food system organizations we fund regarding the pressure points this pandemic has revealed. We believe there is room at this pivotal moment to reimagine a nationwide food system where local and regional infrastructure is effectively supported by policies and funding that bring us closer to systemic change. To that end, here are some of the concerns and approaches this pandemic has brought to light.

- *Food shortages in Indian Country are dire – Native-led solutions are needed*

On reservations and other rural areas of Indian country that already experience widespread lack of running water or electricity, people under stay-at-home orders do not have modern infrastructure for refrigerated storage and food preparation. At the same time, their ability to practice traditional foodways and apply Native agricultural knowledge to the production of food in their environments has been severely restricted. Isolation and poverty have left communities without the distribution routes, supply chains, and storage facilities needed to weather such a severe disruption. It is critical to engage the tribes directly to identify how to meet these challenges in equitable and sustainable ways, in both the short and long term.

- *Livestock consolidation is harmful – small, regional processing networks are better for farmers and consumers*

This pandemic has clearly shown us the fragility of a livestock production and processing system that is so heavily consolidated. With many facilities forced to close as their workforce became ill, such consolidation will negatively impact families at the grocery store with higher prices at a time when unemployment rates are climbing. Moreover, there is great concern the meatpacking industry will use this pandemic crisis to further consolidate their market share. A robust network of smaller scale, regionally-based meat processing facilities across the country could provide an important safety net for the nation's meat supply, as well as marketing options for independent livestock producers. This would reduce the dependence on the consolidated industrial meat supply chain enough to help ease bottlenecks during emergencies and help the country's small and mid-sized farmers create viable and stable regional markets for their meat.

- *Worker health has not been prioritized – frontline workers need frontline protections*

Workers across the food supply chain have fallen ill and many are facing the consequences of this with very little protection, if any. Low-income workers and workers of color have been disproportionately hurt by both the health and the economic impacts of food supply chain disruptions. Workers need to know that their employers are being held accountable to do everything they can to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 in the workplace and be assured they are compensated if they do become ill and unable to work.

- *SNAP demand is rising – local food supply chains can boost food access*

Rising unemployment leads to increased use of the SNAP program. With national grocery supply chains faltering, small farms who produce for local and regional direct markets are a ready source of fresh food for SNAP recipients. Those small, local, and regional direct market producers are also working to pivot to other markets to keep their farms viable. In addition, programs such as the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentives Program (GusNIP) are designed to give SNAP beneficiaries more buying power when accessing nutritious local and regional food. Matching these producers with opportunities to provide healthy, local, and regional food to SNAP recipients is an outcome that provides benefits for all parties involved, including local economies. Ensuring local farmers can participate in SNAP online ordering, transportation, and delivery will help fill nutrition needs just when demand for the program is growing.

- *Farmers and markets miss out on relief – uniquely essential businesses require support*

Farmers who sell through local and regional direct markets, including farmers markets, CSAs, and local restaurants, have seen their revenues plummet, along with the markets that support them in some cases. Those who have been able to pivot to other channels, such as home delivery, are finding ways forward but will need additional assistance to stay afloat long enough to rebuild their markets. We also are hearing of the need for technical support to access relief programs that may be able to help them. Farmers markets, which are the most

important sales channel for many small farmers, also face financial challenges in complying with social distancing requirements while they remain open. Farmers markets, which are the most important sales channel for many small farmers, also face financial challenges in complying with social distancing requirements while they remain open. A majority of farmers markets that apply for 501c3 status are categorized by the IRS as either a 501c4, 501c5 or 501c6, making them ineligible for the SBA PPP program, meaning there is no support for these essential businesses to get through the crisis.

- *Moving food regionally takes coordination – Food Hubs, Value Chain Coordination are the keys*

In the current crisis, food hubs around the country have played a critical role as they have partnered with emergency management officials to aggregate, package, and deliver local food to people in need. Food hubs and Value Chain Coordinators have also supported school districts as disruptions in the industrial food chain threatened their supplies for feeding children even when they are not in school. Continued coordination between food hubs, including work to build larger hub-to-hub transaction streams, has the potential to create stable regional supply chains that will support more small and mid-sized farms, and ensure redundancy in regional food supplies when emergencies strike.

- *Investing in relationships is key – there are models that work to learn from*

We have seen local food systems have the greatest success in stepping up to the current challenges in places where organizations have been working collaboratively over many years to develop food system networks and infrastructure. The state of Michigan is an example where critical relationships were in place across non-profits, food banks, food policy councils, K-12 schools, community colleges, universities, state and Tribal government, and state-based federal offices, allowing for quick and coordinated responses to the food and farm disruption. This model of leveraging various programs and funding at all levels, including Federal grants and other support, could help create long-term food system resilience region by region.

We know there are many more challenges to overcome, and we will continue to learn more as we move through this together. We are inspired, and hope you are as well, by those who are working and finding solutions on the ground in the midst of this pandemic. We would welcome the opportunity to sit down with you or your staff to talk about these issues more in-depth.

Sincerely,

Agua Fund – Ann Mills, Executive Director

Ben & Jerry's Foundation – Rebecca Golden, Director of Programs

Bullitt Foundation – Neelima Shah, Program Officer

Cedar Tree Foundation – Gregory Horner, Senior Program Officer

Chef Ann Foundation – Mara Fleishman, Chief Executive Officer

Dietel & Partners – Tory Dietel Hopps, Senior Partner

Duke University World Food Policy Center – Jennifer Zuckerman, Director of Strategic Initiatives

Fair Food Network – Oran Hesterman, President and CEO

Food Well Alliance – Kim Karris, Executive Director

Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation – Rini Banerjee, President

Lora & Martin Kelly Family Foundation – Craig Kelley, Managing Trustee

Lydia B. Stokes Foundation – Nancy Deren, Trustee

Merck Family Fund – Jenny Russell, Executive Director

Native American Agriculture Fund – Janie Hipp, President and CEO

Nell Newman Foundation – Nell Newman, Founder

Northwest Area Foundation – Kevin Walker, President and CEO

Panta Rhea Foundation – Anna Lappé, Director, Food and Democracy Program

Prince Charitable Trusts –Carolynn Brunette, Managing Director

Sandy River Charitable Foundation – Nathanael Berry, Program Director
Sarah Vogel Donor Advised Fund – Sarah Vogel, Principal
The 11th Hour Project – Sarah Bell, Program Director
The Casey and Family Foundation – Jenn Hartman, Trustee
The Conservation Fund, Resourceful Communities Program – Jaimie McGirt, Faith and Food Coordinator
The High Meadows Fund – Gaye Symington, President
The Kresge Foundation – Stacey Barbas, Senior Program Officer
The Lumpkin Family Foundation – Bruce Karmazin, Executive Director
Thornburg Foundation – Allan Oliver, Executive Director
Thread Fund – Tim Crosby, Principal
Vitalyst Health Foundation – C.J. Eisenbarth Hager, Director, Healthy Communities
Wallace Center at Winrock International – John Fisk, Strategy and Partnerships Director
WK Kellogg Foundation – Devin Foote, Program Officer
WhyHunger – Allison Cohen, Senior Director of Programs