

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 13, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Perdue:

On behalf of processing potato growers in Maine, we write to draw attention to the industry's loss of sales due to the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we urge the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to utilize existing and new spending authorities to make direct purchases of raw potatoes for processing and processed potato products that remain in growers and processors storages from the 2019 crop.

The Maine potato industry, and specialty crop industry as a whole, has faced significant challenges due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, including dramatic reductions in sales as restaurants, food establishments, hospitality businesses and schools have closed. In Maine, 40% of our annual potato crop are processing potatoes grown expressly for use within the food service industry. While the impact to Maine's potato industry is continuing to change day-to-day, and will continue to decline until businesses are allowed to reopen, it is expected that 2,014,400 hundredweight (cwt) of processing potatoes from the 2019 crop may not be sold; 12.2 percent of the total Maine 2019 crop, a value of \$22,104,800. Furthermore, this backlog in the 2019 crop caused by the pandemic will likely result in growers seeing a 10 to 20 percent reduction in their planting contracts as they begin their 2020 planting season.

The current pandemic has resulted in a remarkable need to address Americans' food insecurity and nutrition shortfalls through existing federal nutrition programs within USDA. The recent stimulus bills passed by Congress, the Families First Act and CARES Act, included significant investments for these nutrition program. Additionally, the CARES Act replenished the Commodity Credit Corporation borrowing authority by \$14 billion to stabilize, support, and protect farm income and prices. This funding, coupled with existing USDA spending authority, including, but not limited to Section 32, should be used to provide nutrient-dense vegetables to feeding programs.

We greatly appreciate the efforts USDA has made so far to assist farmers impacted by COVID-19, as well as the agencies continued efforts to provide updates to farmers about critical USDA program being used to respond to the pandemic. However, given the current situation facing processing potato growers in Maine, we request that USDA utilize existing spending authority, as well as new funding made available under the CARES Act and Families First Act, to make direct purchases of raw for processing and processed potato products.

Direct purchases of raw processing potato and processed potato products will help to support Maine growers during these tumultuous times, prevent possible layoffs at potato processing facilities, and most importantly, provide nutrient-dense, high-quality food for vulnerable populations through USDA nutrition programs. We ask that you give this request every appropriate consideration, in accordance with all applicable laws and regulations.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

/s/ Angus S. King, Jr.

ANGUS S. KING, JR.
United States Senator

/s/ Susan M. Collins

SUSAN M. COLLINS
United States Senator

/s/ Chellie Pingree

CHELLIE PINGREE
Member of Congress

/s/ Jared Golden

JARED GOLDEN
Member of Congress