

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 18, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We appreciate your efforts to support farmers and agricultural businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, and believe that the finalization of this rule is another way that USDA can help our financially stressed farmers. We write to follow up on the USDA's progress towards finalizing the National Organic Program 'Origin of Livestock' Rule, which was first proposed by USDA on April 28, 2015.

The organic dairy industry is an important economic engine in both Maine and Vermont. Numerous family farms supply organic milk to co-ops and businesses that offer retail products at thousands of locations across the country, a supply that has been especially critical throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to preserve the viability of this sector and safeguard consumer trust in the organic label, organic producers and USDA-accredited organic certifiers must interpret and apply the organic standards uniformly. Unfortunately, there remains a loophole in the rules governing how livestock are transitioned to organic production. Failure to close this loophole has allowed some producers to continuously cycle cows in and out of organic management, putting smaller producers in states like ours at a significant financial disadvantage and placing the integrity of the organic label at risk. USDA must finalize the Origin Livestock Rule to fix this loophole.

Based on outreach from hundreds of organic dairy industry stakeholders in New England and across the country, we worked to ensure that the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020, which was signed into law on December 20, 2019, included an explicit congressional directive for USDA to finalize the Origin of Livestock Rule:

SEC. 756. Not later than 180 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Agriculture shall issue a final rule based on the proposed rule entitled "National Organic Program; Origin of Livestock," published in the Federal Register on April 28, 2015 (80 Fed. Reg. 23455): Provided, That the final rule shall incorporate public comments submitted in response to the proposed rule.

The 180 day period that Congress provided USDA to finalize this rule has now closed. While we recognize that the demand for service and program delivery at USDA has increased dramatically during the pandemic, we to urge the Department to finalize the Origin of Livestock proposed rule without further delay and establish a timeline for its implementation. Thank you for your attention to this important matter and your continued work on behalf of our farmers.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator



Patrick Leahy
United States Senator