

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 25, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We write today with concerns about the final distribution of food boxes under the Farmers to Families program.

Since this program was initiated with the passage of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, it has provided millions of boxes of produce, meats and dairy products to families across the country. In Vermont, successful implementation through a local vendor in the first two rounds of distributions resulted in over 568,682 boxes being provided to families in need.

As the U.S. Department of Agriculture distributes its final round of contracts under this program, we have serious concerns that the on the ground implementation of the Farmers to Families program will not meet the same high standards for program delivery as Vermont households experienced over the last several months. As Vermont's U.S. Senators and Representative, we are primarily concerned that boxes allocated for distribution in Vermont reach their intended recipients rapidly, without waste, and in a manner that resembles the previous successful distribution of boxes in the state. We are also concerned that the number of families reached will decline based on this new contract and that Vermont farms will not be able to participate in the program as they have before.

To that end, we seek answers to the following questions:

1. We understand that two companies, Costa Fruit & Produce and Sysco, have been awarded contracts to serve Vermont counties.
 - a. To which counties and how many boxes was Costa Food & Produce authorized to deliver, and to which counties and how many boxes was Sysco authorized to deliver? When do Costa and Sysco expect the first boxes to be delivered to Vermonters, and will they be able to provide all authorized boxes to Vermont before the October 31 deadline?

2. The USDA's solicitation for this final round of awards emphasized last mile delivery services, something which has been a focal point in Vermont since the start of the program. This was facilitated by a detailed distribution process by the vendor providing boxes to the state. This process included distribution not only to county-wide distribution centers, but to multiple distribution centers each day in order to decrease lines and integrate households into the existing charitable food system to ensure continued food access. However, the Vermont Foodbank has been told by Costa Fruit & Produce that it will be unable to unload boxes, staff distribution sites, or serve multiple sites per day. As of now, Sysco has not even contacted the Vermont Foodbank about its distribution plan.
 - a. Did Costa Fruit & Produce and Sysco submit specific plans for last mile delivery that will provide the same level of access to Vermonters as has previously been available, and if so, what are the details of those plans? How will the USDA ensure that access for Vermonters to the Farmers to Families food boxes is not diminished under these new contracts?

3. An emphasis of the Farmers to Families program has been supporting families with healthy, nutritious, fresh foods, as well as local farmers who produce that food.
 - a. How is USDA incentivizing contract awardees to utilize fresh foods from the states in which the food boxes will be distributed, so the Farmers to Families food box program continues to support both the families and farmers that make up these communities?

Our greatest concern remains ensuring that Vermonters continue to receive the same level of support through the Farmers to Families program that they have enjoyed since the program was established. Based on what we are hearing on the ground, we harbor grave concerns that this will not be the case. We look forward to your prompt responses to these questions, and to ensuring that Vermonters receive the assistance to which they are entitled.

Sincerely,



PATRICK LEAHY
United States Senator



BERNARD SANDERS
United States Senator



PETER WELCH
United States Representative