

October 5, 2021

The Honorable Secretary Thomas J. Vilsack
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write to you regarding recent reports that schools across the nation are facing shortages of nutritious food options, jeopardizing the ability of schools to adequately feed students, many of which rely on school meals for daily nutrition. As schools face shortages due to issues including supply chain disruptions, we strongly encourage the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to work with independent family farmers and ranchers, often located directly within the school's community, that currently have food in the field that could meet these supply challenges yet are not being fully utilized due to issues with the current school food procurement system. This would also ensure that USDA's current food purchasing practices are aligned with the Biden-Harris Administration's expressed commitment to developing "resilient, diverse, and secure supply chains" that "promote prosperity, advance the fight against climate change, and encourage economic growth in communities of color."¹

We were glad to see the USDA's intention to act in alignment with the Biden-Harris administration's goals by focusing on "local and regional food production" and building "new markets and streams of income for farmers and ranchers using climate-smart practices."² However, there is significant work to be done to align USDA's current purchasing practices with these commitments. For example, nearly 60% of the \$1.3 billion USDA Foods Program spending goes to only fifteen large multinational corporations.³ In particular, Tyson Foods and its subsidiaries contracted nearly 10% of all USDA Foods spending from FY 2018-2020.⁴ Throughout the pandemic, these large multinational corporations have continued to face ongoing supply chain disruptions, primarily due to COVID-19 outbreaks within their processing facilities, which has put added pressure on an already consolidated food supply chain. Meanwhile, we have seen independent family farmers and ranchers step up to feed their communities and remain resilient in the face of the pandemic. Moving forward, we welcome the opportunity to work with the USDA to find ways to improve our nation's food supply chain with respect to resilience, diversity, prosperity, the environment, and the economy.

¹ "Executive Order on America's Supply Chains," The White House, February 24, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/24/executive-order-on-americas-supply-chains/>.

² United States Department of Agriculture, "USDA Seeks Comments on Food System Supply Chains in Response to President Biden's Executive Order to Support Resilient, Diverse, Secure Supply Chains," April 21, 2021, <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2021/04/21/usda-seeks-comments-food-system-supply-chains-response-president>.

³ Friends of the Earth, "USDA Foods: How a \$1.3 billion program can be transformed to create a more just and healthy food system," 2021, <https://1bps6437gg8c169i0y1drtgz-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/USDA-Foods-Policy-Brief-2021-v8.pdf>.

⁴ Friends of the Earth Analysis, May 2021, data available upon request.

Creating opportunities for schools to work with local, resilient, small scale producers would also allow school districts the ability to feed children in a way that aligns with their values. Many school foodservice professionals are frustrated by the idea of serving food from companies that have committed human rights abuses, environmental harms, and violation of federal laws. As one school dietitian in Washington State put it, “I am pulling my hair out every day having to feed these Big Ag products to children.”⁵

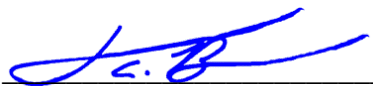
A growing number of school districts have committed to the Good Food Purchasing Program,⁶ which includes a commitment not to source from companies with labor violations. However, when school districts place their commodity purchasing orders with the USDA, they are not given a choice in which company will fill that order. The USDA Foods Program is thereby forcing these school districts to choose between leaving valuable entitlement dollars on the table or purchasing from USDA Foods, knowing that doing so will likely violate the commitment they have made to their communities to buy from producers who value local economies, environmental sustainability, valued workforce, animal welfare and nutrition.⁷

Meanwhile, independent farmers and ranchers who wish to sell to our schools, including those who are committed to the above values, are forced to compete against the heavily-subsidized products already available through the USDA Foods Program. In many cases, these independent producers are following ethical, environmental, and legal best practices which would satisfy the standards of the Good Food Purchasing Program, yet are still losing out.

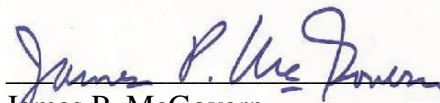
The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to take a hard look at the flaws of our current food system, but it has also created an opportunity for us to build back better as we aim to find ways to withstand future disruptions. It is imperative that the USDA work with independent farmers and ranchers both to nourish the next generation now and build a resilient food procurement system for the future.

Thank you for your dedication to feeding our nation’s children and continued work to align USDA’s food procurement practices with the agency’s policy goals and with those of the Biden-Harris administration. We look forward to working alongside those in the administration to strengthen our food system.

Sincerely,



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

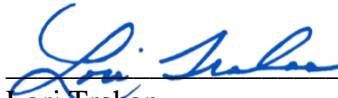
⁵ Friends of the Earth, “USDA Foods.”

⁶ “Good Food Purchasing Program,” Center for Good Food Purchasing, accessed June 23, 2021, <https://goodfoodpurchasing.org/>.


⁷ “The Good Food Purchasing Values,” Center for Good Food Purchasing, accessed June 23, 2021, <https://goodfoodpurchasing.org/program-overview/>.



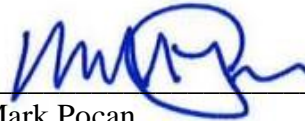
Ron Wyden
United States Senator



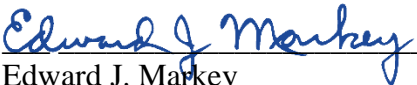
Lori Trahan
Member of Congress



Tina Smith
United States Senator



Mark Pocan
Member of Congress



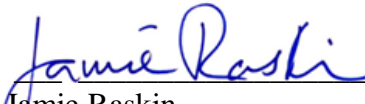
Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Ro Khanna
Member of Congress



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress

Patrick Leahy
United States Senator



Jahana Hayes
Member of Congress



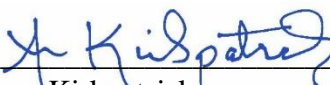
Bernard Sanders
United States Senator




Ed Case
Member of Congress



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Ann Kirkpatrick
Member of Congress



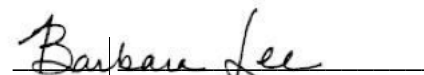
Jon Tester
United States Senator

/s/


Mike Thompson
Member of Congress

/s/

Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



Barbara Lee
Member of Congress



Mary Gay Scanlon
Member of Congress