



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER SERVICES  
COMMISSIONER NICOLE “NIKKI” FRIED

THE CAPITOL

August 10, 2020

Dear Florida Congressional Delegation Members:

As Florida’s Commissioner of Agriculture and on behalf of our state’s \$137 billion agriculture industry, thank you for your united support for Florida’s farmers. From fighting for our seasonal producers in the face of Mexico’s unfair trade practices to voicing opposition to Chinese citrus imports that risk the well-being of our industry already impacted by invasive pests to providing federal support in the aftermath of hurricanes, the delegation has continued to have our farmers’ backs. In the face of the COVID-19, your support has been more crucial as agriculture has replaced tourism as our state’s top economic driver during these challenging times.

As Congress continues negotiating further COVID-19 relief, I know the delegation will continue to advocate for increased and expanded support for our farmers who are still reeling from spring losses topping \$522 million for seasonal crops<sup>1</sup> alone as they face continued uncertainty as the fall harvest approaches. This includes addressing issues with the USDA’s current payment limitation under its Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), expanding eligibility for impacted industries including aquaculture and nursery growers, and extending the enrollment deadline for producers not yet eligible. Congress and the Administration must also provide much-needed resources and guidance to better protect our agriculture workers on the front lines keeping our food supply safe and strong throughout this crisis. Our neighbors’ ability to keep their families fed depends on the success of our agriculture industry, which is directly tied to health and well-being of our farmworkers. I write today to urge you and your colleagues to also maintain critical support for the nutrition programs keeping food on the tables of those facing financial hardships due to the pandemic.

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) administers the state’s \$1.3 billion School Lunch Program, serving 245 million free or reduced-price lunches to two million students. Our Summer BreakSpot Program provides children access to nutritious meals during the summer and during unexpected school closures like we saw this past spring due to COVID-19. From March to May, FDACS provided 42 million meals to children in need through this program. However, as schools begin to reopen in the fall, we could see great disruptions as we move from the Summer BreakSpot Program, which is available to help feed all children, back to the traditional School Lunch Program that requires program enrollment. With so many children in our communities now dependent on free meals due to COVID-19 hardships, the increased processing of meal applications and distribution of additional meals will be a massive undertaking for our already overburdened schools. Moving to universal free school meals for the 2020-2021 school year, as has been proposed in H.R.7887<sup>2</sup> that has the support of more than 30 education, health, nutrition, and hunger relief organizations, could

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<sup>1</sup> FDACS: “Florida Seasonal Crop COVID-19 Impact Assessment.” Published April 15, 2020: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/hou5vjdp01f73ga/Florida%20Seasonal%20Crop%20COVID-19%20Impact%20Assessment.pdf?dl=0>

<sup>2</sup> House Education and Labor Committee: “Chairman Scott Introduces Bill to Provide Free School Meals to All Students During COVID-19 Pandemic.” Published July 30, 2020: <https://edlabor.house.gov/media/press-releases/chairman-scott-introduces-bill-to-provide-free-school-meals-to-all-students-during-covid-19-pandemic>

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help alleviate this burden on the schools. Additionally, providing universal free school meals can help reduce the stigma for children in need and would better support social distancing efforts during meal distribution to reduce the risk of COVID-19 for both students and staff.

In addition to providing universal school meals for the 2020-2021 school year as part of a COVID-19 relief package, I also urge you and your colleagues to extend the Pandemic EBT program through the upcoming school year. A recent study<sup>3</sup> by the Hamilton Project and the Brookings Institution found this program is helping to reduce food hardships and hunger among our nation's children during the pandemic. In Florida, more than 2.1 million eligible children have received over \$670 million in Pandemic EBT benefits.

Lastly, I want to bring to your attention the dire financial situation facing our school meal and other nutrition assistance providers. These organizations have seen increased demand for their services in the face of decreased revenue during the economic crisis caused by COVID-19<sup>4</sup>. While the CARES Act included \$8.8 billion in additional funding for federal child nutrition program food purchases, providers were left without assistance as administrative costs soared. In Florida, the estimated loss to the school districts' school nutrition fund balances due to closures in the 2019-2020 school year is nearly \$160 million<sup>5</sup>. It is critical that emergency funding for school nutrition programs take into account not only the increased need for purchases, but also the increased cost of operations for the meal providers as we work together to keep our students fed.

Thank you again for your continued leadership and support for Florida farmers and families struggling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Working together, we will keep our agriculture economy strong, our farmworkers and food supply safe, and food on the tables for our neighbors in need.

Sincerely,



Nicole Fried

Commissioner of Agriculture

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<sup>3</sup> The Hamilton Project and the Brookings Institute: "The Effect of Pandemic EBT on Measures of Food Hardship." Published July 2020: [https://www.hamiltonproject.org/assets/files/P-EBT\\_LO\\_7.30.pdf](https://www.hamiltonproject.org/assets/files/P-EBT_LO_7.30.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> No Kid Hungry: "The Need for School Nutrition Budget Relief." Published June 2020: <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Need%20for%20School%20Nutrition%20Budget%20Relief.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> FDACS: "COVID-19 Estimated Financial Effect on Sponsors Operating the National School Lunch Program in Florida." Published July 21, 2020: [https://www.fdacs.gov/content/download/92555/file/NSLP\\_COVIDFinancialEffect\\_1pger.pdf](https://www.fdacs.gov/content/download/92555/file/NSLP_COVIDFinancialEffect_1pger.pdf)