

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 25, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Perdue,

We write to express strong concern with the Farm Service Agency's (FSA) recently announced changes to the Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP). At a time when the agriculture industry is still recovering from major supply chain disruptions due to COVID-19, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) must utilize all available authorities and funding to provide assistance to our organic farmers, ranchers, and handlers.

On August 10, 2020, the FSA announced a Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) for Fiscal Year 2020 (FY20) OCCSP funding. While this announcement was welcome news for organic producers and handlers seeking assistance with certification fees, the NOFA included an unexpected amendment to the reimbursement rate and maximum assistance permitted under the program. Instead of reimbursing 75 percent of eligible costs up to \$750 per scope, the FY20 NOFA reflected an administrative decision by FSA to reduce the reimbursement rate to 50 percent of eligible costs up to \$500 per scope.

This change in the reimbursement rate was not anticipated by stakeholders, and we believe it directly contradicts the intent of the overwhelmingly bipartisan Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 which reauthorized and funded OCCSP. The 2018 Farm Bill provided \$24 million from the Commodity Credit Corporation to OCCSP for FY19-23, accompanied by supporting language directing the Secretary to utilize all available carryover funding from FY14-18 when providing certification assistance to the organic sector. It was the intent of Congress that producers and handlers would be eligible to receive the maximum amount of assistance as permitted by law, and any changes to the reimbursement rate were not expected at the time of enactment.

These amendments to OCCSP come at a difficult time for the agriculture sector, particularly for those small-scale producers who benefit most from cost share assistance. The spread of COVID-19 dramatically impacted supply chains and the agricultural workforce, resulting in decreased productivity and tighter margins during an already stressed time in the agriculture economy. For organic producers who have struggled to receive assistance via other USDA programs, the OCCSP was seen as a reliable form of support.

USDA must consider and abide by the intent of Congress when implementing the 2018 Farm Bill. Therefore, we request that USDA provide the maximum amount of assistance through OCCSP as permitted by law. Additionally, farmers and ranchers across this country continue to adjust to the impacts of COVID-19. The capacity of these producers is strained as they focus their attention on rebuilding their operations and ensuring the health and safety of their workers. To ensure that these producers have time to participate in this program and access these funds, we also request that USDA extend any applicable program deadlines for the FY20 funding. We stand ready to work with you in support of our organic farmers and ranchers at this challenging time.

Respectfully,



_____/S/_____
Stacey E. Plaskett
Chair

_____/S/_____
Anthony Brindisi
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Marcia Fudge
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Alma Adams, PHD.
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Kim Schrier
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Xochilt Torres Small
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Mark Pocan
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Jim Costa
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Ron Kind
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Mike Thompson
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Rodney Davis
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Dan Newhouse
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Peter DeFazio
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Antonio Delgado
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Jimmy Panetta
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Salud O. Carbajal
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
TJ Cox
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Jahana Hayes
Member of Congress

_____/S/_____
Earl Blumenauer
Member of Congress

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Derek Kilmer
Member of Congress

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Juan Vargas
Member of Congress

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Tom O'Halleran
Member of Congress

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Jared Huffman
Member of Congress

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Tim Ryan
Member of Congress

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Rick Larsen
Member of Congress

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Glenn Grothman
Member of Congress

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Jared Golden
Member of Congress

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Tom Reed
Member of Congress

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Cynthia Axne
Member of Congress

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Ed Perlmutter
Member of Congress

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Ann McLane Kuster
Member of Congress

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Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress

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Dave Loebsack
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John Garamendi
Member of Congress

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Sean Patrick Maloney
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Kurt Schrader
Member of Congress

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Tulsi Gabbard
Member of Congress