

April 20, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Purdue:

The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), America's largest food and retail union, represents over 250,000 members who work at meatpacking and poultry plants across this country. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, our hard-working members who work in these plants have found themselves on the frontlines of this public health crisis.

Currently, at least 613 UFCW members who work in meatpacking and poultry plants have been directly impacted by COVID-19 and six have tragically passed away. Five UFCW-represented meatpacking facilities are shut down, including two of the largest beef-packing facilities in the country. Given the terrible price that has been paid, and the serious risk that COVID-19 poses, it is absolutely imperative that more is done to protect these essential workers and our nation's food supply.

To help prevent more loss of life and damage to our food supply, we are urgently requesting that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) adopt a series of safety actions and issue the following safety guidelines for all meatpacking facilities:

- **Prioritize Essential Workers for Testing:** In order to ensure the health and safety of workers and protect the food supply, essential workers, such as those in meatpacking and food processing, must be prioritized for testing
- **Immediate Access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):** Though social and physical distancing are essential to preventing the spread of COVID-19, workers still need access to PPE, such as masks and gloves. The reality is that many of our meatpacking members lack the critical personal protection equipment necessary to do their job and reduce the risk of exposure. It is essential that the USDA, in conjunction with the White House Coronavirus Task Force, prioritize all meatpacking and food workers for PPE to ensure the health and safety of these workers and to protect our food supply.
- **Immediate Halt On Line Speed Waivers:** In the first two weeks of this month, the USDA's Food and Safety Inspection Service [approved](#) 11 regulatory waivers for poultry plants to increase their maximum line speed. Rather than protect our

food supply and workers, these waivers guarantee that workers are more crowded along a meatpacking line and more workers are put at risk of either catching or spreading the virus. It is critical that the USDA immediately cease granting any new waivers and suspend all existing waivers that allow plants to operate at faster speeds.

- **Mandate Social Distancing Where Possible:** In order to responsibly protect workers and prevent spread of the disease, companies must enforce and practice six-foot social and physical distancing to the greatest extent possible, even if this means production slows down. Where distancing is not possible, companies should use plexiglass barriers to separate and protect workers.
- **Isolate Workers Who Show Symptoms or Test Positive for COVID-19:** In light of the largest outbreak to date at Smithfield Foods in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, it is critical to identify and isolate workers who have tested positive or who exhibit symptoms of COVID-19. These workers should be allowed to quarantine at home, with pay, per the recommendations set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

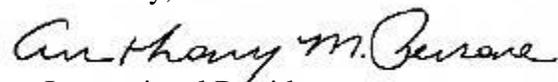
As you must know, other federal agencies, like the [U.S. Department of Transportation](#), have issued clear guidelines to protect workers in specific industries. Now, more than ever, it is critical that the USDA do the same before this growing health crisis leads to more workers losing their lives and long-lasting damage to our nation's food supply.

Please know that our union's leadership and our entire organization of 1.3 million members are prepared to work with the USDA to do whatever is necessary to help limit the spread of this terrible disease. For us, this issue has nothing to do with politics, but reflects our sincere fear that this crisis will only worsen in the coming weeks.

Again, we urgently request that the USDA take immediate action to protect our communities, our nation's food supply, and all meatpacking workers – union and nonunion.

Thank you, and I look forward to discussing these issues further.

Sincerely,

  
International President

cc: Vice President Mike Pence  
Dr. Robert R. Redfield, MD, Director, Center for Disease Control and Prevention  
Loren Sweatt, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Occupational Health and Safety Administration