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January 8, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250-0002

Dear Secretary Perdue:

I write today to draw your attention to several provisions included in H.R. 1865, the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020 that are of prime importance to Alaskans. I ask that you direct your staff to pay close attention to these matters as the Department of Agriculture works to comply with its provisions.

First and foremost, I ask that you direct the Department to act quickly to transfer funds appropriated by H.R. 1865 to the eligible states' agriculture agencies under the new program, Micro-Grants for Food Security, so that they may conduct a competitive process to distribute funds to individuals, tribes, religious organizations, food banks and other non-profits, federally-funded educational facilities, and local governments. H.R. 1865 provided \$5 million for this program for Fiscal Year 2020 (FY20). Given the appropriation provided by H.R. 1865, Alaska and Hawaii will each receive \$2 million, while the insular areas will each reach \$125,000. I am aware that federal agencies may distribute funds authorized and appropriated by statute prior to working to develop and finalize regulations and I encourage you to do so in this case. The swift transfer of the appropriated funds will allow the eligible states to begin the competitive application process prior to beginning of the 2020 growing season.

The Micro-Grants for Food Security program was authorized by Section 4206 of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (Public Law 115-334). The purpose of this program is to "increase the quantity and quality of locally grown food through small-scale gardening, herding, and livestock operations in food insecure communities in areas of the United States that have significant levels of food insecurity and import a significant quantity of food". While the 2017 Census of Agriculture indicates that the number of small farmers in Alaska has increased, Alaska still imports over 95 percent of our food from the Lower 48 and overseas across long supply lines that reduce the quality and dramatically increase the cost of our food—especially in rural areas. Alaskans are also at risk of food insecurity in the event of a disaster that damages our ports or airports or, as after 9/11 grounds air travel to the 82 percent of Alaska's communities not connected by road. In addition, changes to Alaska's climate have affected the migration patterns of animals and fish on which our rural populations rely for the majority of their nutrition, increasing their food insecurity.

I also direct your attention to the following appropriations report language contained in Senate Report 116-110 and adopted unchanged via H.R. 1865. I ask the Department to promptly act on these provisions:

Agricultural Research Service

Research Assistance.—The Committee encourages ARS to provide direct, place-based assistance to 1862 Institutions in States that do not have ARS facilities to address the research priorities of such States, such as invasive plant species and insects that cause significant impacts to agriculture, aquaculture, and communities in such States and to assist in the development of specialty and horticultural crops to increase food security and expand marketing opportunities for small farmers. The Committee directs ARS to submit a report on the prospective options of such assistance.

Food and Nutrition Service

Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations [FDPIR] Food Package.—The Committee commends the Department for convening the FDPIR Food Package Review Work Group, which includes tribal representatives and staff from FNS, to increase the amount and variety of traditional foods included in FDPIR food packages and to increase the amount of foods purchased from American Indian and Alaska Native producers and businesses. The Committee directs the Department to provide a report detailing its plans to include a greater variety of traditional foods as regular components of FDPIR food baskets; its plans to identify additional Native American and Alaska Native producers of traditional foods, including wild salmon, caribou, reindeer, elk, and other foods; and its plans to purchase additional traditional foods from a greater number of indigenous producers and businesses.

WIC Food Package —The work of the National Academies of Science (NAS) to review and make recommendations for updating the WIC food packages to reflect current science and cultural factors is recognized. The agreement notes, however, that while all revised packages now allow some fish, the amounts remain low compared to the recommendations of other authoritative health agencies. The agreement strongly encourages the Department to consider the health and cultural benefits of fish consumption as the NAS recommendations are reviewed and used to inform the Department's next course of action. The agreement also strongly encourages the Department to continue to allow states to submit cultural food package proposals to respond to the cultural preferences of WIC participants in states like Alaska.

I also would like to commend your staff at the Food and Nutrition Service for their attention to a provision I included in H.R. 21, the FY2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act that is repeated in H.R. 1865 expressing support for allowing State Agencies to enable Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) service institutions to develop and implement innovative methods to ensure that eligible youth that face barriers to accessing SFSP can be fed by non-congregate means and settings.

Thank you for your attention to these provisions. I look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,



Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator