

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 29, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We write to express concern and request an investigation regarding reports we have received from the New Hampshire Food Bank that the product provided in the third round of the Farmers to Families Food Box program has fallen short of meeting nutritional standards and is not suitable to serve to families in need of assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The intent of the Farmers to Families Food Box program is to provide fresh produce, dairy and meat products from American producers of all sizes to food banks, community and faith-based organizations and other non-profits serving Americans in need. We are alarmed to hear allegations that the food provided to the New Hampshire Food Bank in the third round of this program did not meet the standards of the high quality product provided in previous rounds.

During the second round of the Farmers to Families Food Box program, beginning on July 1 and ending on September 18, 2020, Costa Fruit & Produce was awarded the contract by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to provide supplemental food to the New Hampshire Food Bank. According to local providers, the product was high quality and included products such as lean cooked chicken breast, fluid milk and a variety of dairy and fresh produce.

However, USDA awarded the contract for the third round of the program to a different distributor, Vincent Farms, instead of the proposal submitted by the New Hampshire Food Bank and Costa Fruit & Produce. The product subsequently provided to the New Hampshire Food Bank in round three by Vincent Farms was of enormously inferior nutritional quality and included, for example, low-quality scrapple as the protein. The New Hampshire Food Bank also submitted a proposal with the Abbey Group, located in Vermont, to address the "last mile" delivery of product to the food bank. The New Hampshire Food Bank relies on partnerships with contractors like the Abbey Group to ensure food delivery, but this proposal was not awarded.

Additionally, we understand that the USDA is paying \$40 - \$60 per box under the Farmers to Families Food Box Program. However, the cost per box of food provided to the New Hampshire Food Bank by the round three distributor has been estimated to equal \$10 - \$12. This significant discrepancy in value indicates a large potential profit opportunity for this distributor. Each tractor-trailer delivering to a food bank can carry more than 1,000 boxes of food. By this estimate, the distributor could potentially be making \$30,000 - \$50,000 on each tractor-trailer, while providing substandard food to the New Hampshire Food Bank for distribution to New Hampshire families.

We urge the USDA to launch an immediate investigation into this matter prior to announcing the contract award recipients for the fourth round of the Farmers to Families Food Box program. We also request responses to the following questions before contract awards are announced:

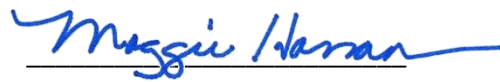
1. What criteria is used to select the contract recipient of each round of the Farmers to Families Food Box program and to what extent does the USDA solicit feedback from food banks, community and faith-based organizations and nonprofit organizations to inform distributor contract decisions?
2. What accountability measures are in place to ensure distributors are providing nutritious food, to track the cost of products in each box and the profit being secured by the distributor and to uphold a minimum nutritional standard for products included in each box of food?
3. Is there a formal appeal or reporting process for a food bank, community or faith-based organization or nonprofit organization to contest the USDA's contract award decision or to report food safety concerns?

In the midst of a global pandemic and while families are experiencing food insecurity at incredible rates, it is essential that the food provided by the U.S. government to our local food banks and other entities is reliable. Now more than ever, keeping families fed and safe should be our top priority. Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Ann McLane Kuster
Member of Congress



Chris Pappas
Member of Congress