April 20, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

The U.S. Department of Agriculture at every level has mounted an incredible response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This support of our farmers and ranchers remains vital to mitigating any disruptions to the agricultural supply chain, and we sincerely thank you and your team for working within the Administration to provide financial assistance during these difficult and unprecedented times.

The financial relief measures the Department is providing to production agriculture is a much-needed tourniquet, but this pandemic is exacerbating the ongoing mental health problems for some farmers and ranchers. We have reached the point where producers are making heartbreaking decisions to destroy or abandon their produce, dump their milk, and even destroy livestock. At the same time because of shortages, food prices at grocery stores have increased, making it appear as though someone is profiting at the producer’s expense. The frustration of seeing the value of your hard work going for naught can compound feelings of depression. For some, mental health may become as or more important than financial health. Unfortunately, money will not heal all problems.

Looking back at the late 90’s, similar situations of insufficient processing capacity led to an oversupply of hogs and prices bottomed out at around 8 cents a pound. This led to many independent producers exiting the business and consolidation in the industry. Sadly, and often not talked about, these circumstances led to an increase in suicides. All of us who work for America’s producers owe it to them to do all we can to prevent a repeat of this sad history.

Now more than ever, your role as Secretary is commanding the attention and trust of nearly every producer in the country. We would like to suggest using this platform to extend a lifeline to producers who may be struggling.

Particularly, we believe it would be helpful to convey some key points to producers:

• You are not alone. Producers across the country are facing similar challenges. We all need to step up, particularly in rural America, and reach out to our neighbors.
• This is not your fault. The current environment is something you could have never predicted or planned for and the difficult decisions you are being forced to make on your farm are no fault of your own.

• You will get through this and we are here to help you do that. There will be challenging days ahead, but there are resources available on how to cope and manage the stress and emotional toll this pandemic is causing.

USDA, along with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, has been active for several years now to help producers struggling with farm stress. Communicating these mental health resources to producers at large and disseminating this information across USDA, potentially through county extension offices, would be a very valuable lifeline.

We must all look out for one another across rural America, know how to identify the signs of someone struggling, and help connect them with the appropriate support. Again, thank you for your steadfast work on behalf of American agriculture and we stand ready to work with you to support American producers.

Sincerely,

Charles F. Conner
President & CEO