April 21, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Perdue,

Thank you for your leadership, action and support of America’s farmers and ranchers in responding to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. We appreciate your efforts to ensure that the agriculture sector has access to the tools that are needed to weather the economic downturn America is experiencing, particularly your efforts to mitigate any disruptions to the agricultural supply chain and working within the Administration to provide financial assistance.

While we strongly support efforts to limit the spread of coronavirus, last night’s announcement from President Trump that he would temporarily suspend immigration has created concerns for many in labor-intensive agriculture. As you know, many producers are dependent upon foreign labor, including the H-2A agricultural visa program, and other non-immigrant agricultural worker visas to meet labor needs. Thanks to your leadership and hard work in the early days of this crisis, the State Department has prioritized processing of H-2A applications and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has exempted H-2A visa holders as critical essential workers who can cross from Mexico into the U.S.

In order to ensure uninterrupted food, crop, and commodity production, we urge you to work within the Administration to exempt all H-2A, as well as any other non-immigrant visa petition involving an agricultural worker, from the President’s Executive Order. A significant number of farmers have applications currently approved or pending, have made the significant investment to build housing, and have paid for transportation with workers scheduled to arrive over the next few weeks. To make this investment and receive no workers in return would be catastrophic to the viability of the farm operation staying in business.

An interruption to the arrival of agricultural workers will undoubtedly cause a significant disruption to the U.S. food supply. Not only will the loss of H-2A workers negatively impact the farmer, but an entire chain of workers, who are mostly American, throughout agriculture. In fact, every farmworker engaged in labor intensive agriculture support two to three off farm jobs throughout the sector. The food and agriculture sector, responsible for food manufacturing, processing, and storage facilities, accounts for one-fifth of the nation’s economic activity and has been designated a “Critical Infrastructure Sector” by DHS. The loss of H-2A workers will unequivocally lead to further American job losses.

The American people need a stable food supply to maintain healthy diets and strong immune systems, especially now during this national health crisis. The failure to take necessary action to protect our food supply will result in bare shelves in grocery store produce aisles, not from panic buying, but as the result
of the federal government directly causing a shortage of critical labor. We urge you and the President to not let that happen.

Again, thank you for your steadfast work on behalf of American agriculture and we stand ready to work with you to ensure our American producers have the adequate labor they need to continue feeding America.

Sincerely,

Charles F. Conner
President & CEO