

December 1, 2020

The Honorable Andrew Cuomo
Chairman
National Governors Association
444 North Capitol Street, Suite 267
Washington, D.C. 20001

Dear Governor Cuomo:

We commend our nation's Governors for the time and dedication each of you have provided to protecting public health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like all Americans, we owe a huge debt of gratitude to the first responders and health care professionals who have been on the front lines and worked tirelessly to treat and provide comfort to those contracting the virus, as well as their families. Our industry sectors, too, have remained on duty during the pandemic to provide safe, affordable and nutritious human and animal food to our neighbors and fellow citizens. The outbreak has ravaged both our citizens and our economy and will require continued commitment to overcome it in the months ahead.

And, like all Americans, we are thankful that an unprecedented research effort has led to the development of multiple new vaccines that soon may be approved and made available to protect public health. From the beginning of the outbreak, our organizations and member businesses have taken necessary steps to protect our workers' health. We understand and take seriously the tremendous responsibility that accompanies feeding the nation and many around the globe. While our members were proactive and remain vigilant, aspects of this pandemic, such as community spread or infections contracted outside the workplace, simply are beyond our control.

Many of our members continue to struggle to secure adequate access to medical facilities given the rural nature of our agricultural production and processing infrastructure. Much of our skilled and technical workforce in rural areas is derived from a very limited labor pool. Our labor force continues to ebb and flow as employees become infected. A single infected employee necessitates that we quarantine additional employees with whom he or she may have been in contact. This leaves critical positions unfilled, overworking existing employees and threatening to shut down processing facilities. We've come dangerously close to situations that could very easily create disruptions and shortages in the food supply chain.

As we approach the time when new COVID-19 vaccines are approved and ready for distribution, we would like to reiterate our support for priority access for essential critical infrastructure workers. As you know, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has designated the food and agriculture sector as part of the nation's critical infrastructure. This ensures planting, harvesting, processing, and distribution of human and animal food can meet the needs of consumers. We fully appreciate and support that our nation's heroic first responders, medical professionals, elderly and caretakers, along with other vulnerable individuals, clearly have the highest priority for vaccination. However, as you move beyond these highest priority groups, the undersigned organizations implore our nation's Governors to include front line food and agriculture employees in the next highest priority for the vaccine in their respective state COVID-19 Vaccination Plans. This request is consistent with the recommendations of both the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine's (NASEM) Framework for Equitable Allocation of COVID-19 Vaccine and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) COVID-19 Vaccination Program Interim Playbook for Jurisdiction Operations.

NASEM specifically stated that "Individuals in the roles considered to be essential for societal functioning include those whose absence from their societal roles or work puts others and the society at risk of loss of needed goods and services if they become infected (e.g., physicians, nurses, other health care providers, first responders, **workers employed in the food supply system** (emphasis added), transportation workers, teachers, etc.)." With

respect to who in the food supply chain is critical, NASEM stated “Groups of critical risk workers who are at higher risk of exposure include workers in the U.S. food supply system who plant, harvest, and package crops; slaughter and process meat; and deliver food to stores and stock shelves and staff checkout lines.” CDC has a similar perspective as its Playbook describes the targeted workers in Phase 1-B as: “People who play a key role in keeping essential functions of society running and cannot socially distance in the workplace (e.g., emergency and law enforcement personnel not included in Phase 1-A, **food packaging and distribution workers** [emphasis added]), teachers/school staff, childcare providers), adults with high-risk medical conditions who possess risk factors for severe COVID-19 illness, and people 65 years of age or older (including those living in long-term care facilities).” We concur with these recommendations from our nation’s top scientists and experts on infectious diseases.

We thank you for your consideration and stand ready to work with our nation’s Governors to protect our workers and continue to provide safe, abundant, affordable and nutritious food to all consumers.

Respectfully,

Ag Retailers Association
American Farm Bureau
American Seed Trade Association
American Soybean Association
Biotechnology Innovation Organization
CropLife America
Farm Credit Council
The Fertilizer Institute
Institute for Shortening and Edible Oils
National Association of Wheat Growers
National Cattlemen’s Beef Association
National Corn Growers Association
National Cotton Council
National Council of Farmer Cooperatives
National Farmers Union
National Grain and Feed Association
National Milk Producers Federation
National Oilseed Processors Association
National Pork Producers Council
National Sorghum Producers
North American Export Grain Association
North American Millers Association
United Egg Producers
United Fresh Produce Association
USA Rice Federation