Dear Secretary Perdue,

We write to share our concerns for the implementation of round three of the Farmers to Families Food Box (FFFB) Program and to urge your swift action to ensure that awarded distributors and partnering non-profits are receiving clear directions on the implementation of this final round. We share the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) desire to provide nourishment to those most in need and we are confident that with additional clarity and flexibility the FFFB Program can serve hungry families successfully.

It has come to our attention that the third round of the FFFB Program includes significant alterations in distribution guidelines, onerous disclosure forms, and a shift in responsibility for the “last mile” delivery of the food boxes. The initial round of FFFB was rushed into action and faced problematic contracting issues. Despite these initial stumbling blocks, distributors and non-profits worked in good faith to implement this program with the goal of getting food to those in need. Within the last week, foodbanks and distributors alike were startled to learn that as many as half of the previous contracts were not renewed, leaving foodbanks scrambling to find new partners, despite weeks of careful planning to ensure round three was efficiently executed.

These recent decisions have exposed a lack of communication between the administration and food distributors. In addition to not knowing which distributors would have a contract renewed in round three, we were also concerned to learn that USDA has altered the distribution system from regional to county specific. This newly developed adjustment has led to widespread confusion among distributors and non-profits who have prepared for weeks to implement round three based on the previous guidelines. In some cases, these new contracts have led to communities being served by distributors hundreds of miles away with no previous connection to the area where they will be working—we note that such a change contradicts the President’s claim in his accompanying letter that families will receive “locally sourced” food. Additionally, many
foodbanks who service multiple counties not only need to develop partnerships with multiple new distributors, but also a lack clarity from USDA as to their eligibility to serve beyond their immediate county. We ask that you work quickly to provide guidance to distributors and foodbanks on their allowable services and provide us with the criteria used to award contracts to distributors for round three.

Lastly, we have heard concern from local foodbanks that there is confusion on who is responsible for covering the “last mile” of FFFB deliveries. In previous rounds, foodbanks have served as a sub-contractor, charging the distributor for delivering the final mile. In many cases, this system benefited distributors who were less likely to provide door-to-door delivery efficiently, as well as non-profits who received payment for delivering the meals those final, critical miles. We understand, however, that there were foodbanks who struggled with the “last mile” issue previously and that USDA specifically worked to address this issue in round three. Despite this effort, it is clear the problem still exists and has become more onerous for those who had an effective system in place during the previous two rounds. Under the new guidelines, the awarded contractors will hire other sub-contractors, who will then deliver to non-profits. The non-profit will still be covering the burden of delivering the last mile, yet without compensation. We are concerned that such a change will unfairly burden foodbanks and make it harder for families in need to access the FFFB. Therefore, we would like to know why USDA solicited input in Basic Ordering Agreement (BOA) proposals for round three regarding partnerships and delivery plans, only to disregard this input in favor of awarding contracts to companies to serve counties where they have no “last mile” arrangement?

As a result of the changes made in round three, families will be left struggling to access food resources. In the midst of a global health pandemic, it is critical that we provide those most in need with direct federal assistance. We understand the need for alterations to better service communities across the nation, however, these new stricter rules are not the approach that will benefit all. If you are unaware of the complications created by round three guidelines, we would be happy to connect you with non-profits who are scrambling to adjust in response to these last minute, and irresponsible changes.

We are in danger of losing a critical part of our food supply when so many Americans are in such need, and we urge the USDA to work with the relevant non-profits and distributors to provide clarity on round three changes and consider flexibility as needed to ensure the FFFB Program is as successful as possible.

Please provide a response on why these changes were made and how you plan to mitigate these concerns. Thank you for your attention to this critical matter, we look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,
Jackie Speier
Member of Congress

Dina Titus
Member of Congress

Norma J. Torres
Member of Congress

Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress

Peter Welch
Member of Congress

Thomas R. Suozzi
Member of Congress

Paul D. Tonko
Member of Congress

David Trone
Member of Congress

Filemon Vela
Member of Congress

Bonnie Watson Coleman
Member of Congress