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November 23, 2020

Ms. Emily W. Murphy
Administrator
General Services Administration
1800 F Street NW
Washington DC 20405

Dear Administrator Murphy:

I write to express my concerns about the impacts to farmers, ranchers, and consumers from the lack of a timely Presidential transition process.

The inability of President-elect Biden's transition team to access briefings and other resources to be brought up to speed by career, civil service experts may directly impact food costs and consumers' options on grocery store shelves. And, it jeopardizes our food supply and the economic wellbeing of American farmers and ranchers, and by extension, the rural communities where they live and work.

As COVID-19 cases continue to spike, the transition team must be briefed on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) work in meat and poultry plants under the President's Defense Production Act Executive Order and the Department's coordination with other Federal, state, and local agencies. As we saw earlier this year, outbreaks can go from bad to worse in a short period of time. Without thorough briefings on this subject, we risk worker health and safety, the security of our food supply, and farmers' livelihoods.

At the same time that we grapple with a human health crisis, African Swine Fever (ASF) is a highly contagious and lethal hog disease that has now spread to nearly all major pork producing regions of the world except North and South America. If ASF arrives in the United States, it would have immediate animal welfare, food supply, and trade ramifications and would call for drastic and immediate actions to contain its spread. Mitigating such a disease would be difficult in the best of times, but pressures on resources due to COVID-19 would create an even larger challenge.

USDA is collaborating with international partners to better reduce the risk of ASF entering the U.S., but without access to briefings by Department staff, the transition team is left to rely only on publicly available information. Thus, there will be an avoidable gap in prepared, informed senior

staff at USDA able to work quickly and effectively to protect American hog farmers and the $34 billion pork industry from this devastating disease.

Our poultry growers are also monitoring outbreaks of High Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) across Europe and Asia. The 2014-2015 outbreak of HPAI in U.S. poultry flocks resulted in the loss of more than 50 million chickens and turkeys, cost billions, and closed major export markets for years. As that experience showed, prompt action and close coordination with growers, states, and international partners is essential to minimize the potential negative impacts of an outbreak. The transition team must be briefed on this situation to avoid the worst of these consequences.

In addition to these animal diseases, there are several high priority trade issues being actively negotiated with international trade partners. Without appropriate access to briefings during this transition period, the incoming Biden Administration will be behind our international competitors going into continued negotiations – an avoidable situation with potentially harmful economic consequences to American farmers and ranchers and the rural communities they live in.

The meat and poultry sectors are also facing another potential disaster as the U.S. has a continued shortage of CO_2 production, resulting in part from the downturn in the ethanol production. CO_2 is used in multiple forms and a variety of stages in meat and poultry processing, and a shortage may put the industry in competition with other uses, including medical uses like a COVID-19 vaccine program. CO_2 and dry ice are also utilized in other aspects of the food supply beyond the meat sector. Ensuring an adequate supply of CO_2 is one of the reasons that I included support for the ethanol industry in the House COVID-19 response packages.

Dedicated civil service staff in the USDA Office of Homeland Security and throughout the Department are monitoring these and other crucial situations, but it will take high level leadership and the ability to muster funding to address them. As current senior appointees begin to depart the current Administration, the handover of this information simply cannot wait until January 20, 2020.

I appreciate the opportunity to share some of the potential impacts on American agriculture resulting from not having transition staff in place and fully briefed as the turnover in leadership grows closer. I urge you to avoid these and other preventable negative consequences by assuring a timely and collaborative transition.

Sincerely,

(b) (6) [redacted]

Collin C. Peterson
Chairman

cc: The Honorable Sonny Perdue, Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture