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August 10, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

In Michigan, as elsewhere across the nation, COVID-19 has wreaked havoc up and down the food supply chain as well as with those already struggling to secure enough to eat for themselves and their families. In follow up to our phone conversation and your visit to the state earlier this summer, I urge you to consider the following requests to address these challenges:

SNAP Reforms Needed to Reduce Food Insecurity

I am grateful for the actions taken by President Biden, USDA, and Congressional leaders like Sen. Stabenow to address food hardship during the pandemic by increasing and expanding access to critical Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. I also applaud President Biden's executive order mandating a re-evaluation of the adequacy of SNAP in helping those in need afford an adequate diet.

Roughly 1.3 million Michiganders rely on benefits to meet their food needs, and a third of Michigan households receiving SNAP have children. For many across the country and in Michigan, current SNAP benefit levels fall well short of what's needed to buy and prepare nutritious food. For example, the average cost of a meal in Michigan is \$2.93, but the maximum SNAP benefit per meal is \$1.86. It's clear that the Thrifty Food Plan is long past due for an update – one that accurately reflects the cost of a standard healthy diet today. I urge the USDA to move quickly to reexamine and update the plan so as to further reduce food insecurity in Michigan and across the country.

I also urge the USDA to address the SNAP benefits cliff, which unfairly punishes low-income families, including those in Michigan, who can become ineligible for benefits because of a small increase in income. We should be doing all that we can to promote economic mobility and food security, not reducing benefits before a family is stable or creating a disincentive to work.

The pandemic also highlighted the challenges many SNAP recipients with mobility issues face in utilizing their benefits. To facilitate use, I encourage the USDA to work with retailers to minimize delivery costs or to provide separate funding that does not subtract from benefit amounts to cover online delivery fees. I also urge the USDA to make every effort to expedite the onboarding time for retailers to process online EBT payments.

Protect and Enhance the Dairy Supply Chain

Volatile milk prices predating the pandemic and supply chain disruptions caused by COVID-19 have made it increasingly difficult for dairy producers to remain solvent, resulting in the significant loss of licensed dairy herds in Michigan and throughout the country. It's clear that additional relief is needed to help dairy farmers

weather this difficult period. To that end, I urge you to expedite additional direct compensation payments to dairy farmers retroactive to January 1, 2021. This much needed action would go a long way in alleviating the financial strain facing our hardworking dairy families and in preventing the further loss of dairy farms in states like Michigan.

I also urge you to move quickly to stand up and streamline the Dairy Product Donation Program. Throughout the pandemic, Michigan's dairy farmers stepped up to help meet the needs of households struggling to feed their families by donating milk and cheese to food banks across the state, despite facing an economic crisis of their own. By making it easier for dairy producers to participate in the program and streamlining reimbursement, we could continue to grow and replicate Michigan's successful partnerships between dairy farms and food banks to the benefit of dairy families and those in need.

Strengthening Food Supply Chain Resiliency via Alternative Food Production Methods

In addition to the challenges above, the COVID-19 pandemic put a spotlight on many of the existing vulnerabilities in our food supply chain and the need for additional methods of sustainable and reliable food production to accompany traditional farming practices. One such method is vertical farming, of which the advantages are numerous: higher productivity in a much smaller area; shorter growing times; lower water use; reduced foodborne illness outbreaks and fresh produce grown much closer to where it's eaten. I urge USDA to consider new programs and incentives to help grow this key industry, including allowing vertical farm facility construction as an eligible entity under the \$4 billion provided in the American Rescue Plan to strengthen food supply chains.

Thank you for your careful consideration of these requests and for your ongoing leadership on behalf of farmers and families. I look forward to our continued partnership to reduce hunger and strengthen our food supply chain.

Sincerely,



Gretchen Whitmer
Governor of Michigan