

Dr. Scott Hutchins  
USDA Deputy Under Secretary of Research, Education, and Economics  
Dr. Chavonda Jacobs Young  
Acting Chief Scientist  
Dr. J. Scott Angle  
Director, USDA NIFA

Honorable Drs. Hutchins, Jacobs Young and Angle,

In an increasingly interconnected world, outbreaks and global epidemics that impact public health, agriculture and trade have become a reality. It is imperative that governments worldwide have robust mechanisms to respond to these emerging threats with sound actions and fact-based communication and also support timely, prioritized, and meaningful research to guide sound policy and practice. COVID-19 is a test of this system.

Domestic research agencies, such as USDA NIFA and USDA ARS have long anticipated the need to invest into rapid response research, and developed mechanisms to support untangling emerging problems while easing bureaucratic hurdles. Now is the time to activate these mechanisms.

The signatories of this letter speak on behalf of over 5,000 member companies that represent the entire fruit, vegetable and floral supply chain from growing to shipping, manufacturing, distribution, wholesaling, retail and food service. Over 95% of fresh or frozen produce in the United States is touched by at least one of our members. We ask USDA NIFA to provide immediate funding to research groups seeking to address public health questions surrounding SARS-Cov-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. This research is critical to ensure the food industries can continue to provide safe, healthy, and nourishing food for American consumers.

While there is no evidence that SARS-CoV-2 is foodborne, fear-mongers and irresponsible members of the media fan the flames of anxieties amidst the current outbreak. Not addressing these questions makes it difficult to make science-based decisions by public health officials, consumers and everybody along the food supply chain. Not knowing answers to these questions feeds anxiety and disrupts trade.

As significant efforts focus on developing vaccines, testing antiviral and supportive therapies, it is crucial not to overlook public health aspects of this outbreak. Published research makes it clear that most coronaviruses are not stable in the environment long-term, and are not likely to be transmitted with food or in water. However, most of the peer-reviewed studies were conducted with either surrogates or with other human coronaviruses. While these studies have a significant directional and logic-based prevention value, CDC is clear in that the behavior of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 in many respects is distinct from that of SARS-CoV-1 (the cause of SARS), MERS and laboratory-adapted viruses and phages that are traditionally used as surrogates in research. While comprehensive research will take time, with targeted and smart investments, much progress can be made. SARS-CoV-2 is culturable within cell lines. It is a BSL-3 organism, and a number of BSL-3 containments already exist on campuses of large U.S. universities that are prepared to undertake this research. Most importantly, universities and other research entities have a brain trust of uniquely qualified scientists who are ready to tackle these uncertainties.

We ask USDA NIFA to provide funds to support research that will define:

- (1) Time course of SARS-CoV-2 persistence/decline on food contact surfaces over a range of temperatures that are common in food industry.
- (2) Inactivation dynamics on food contact surfaces using common disinfectants, novel but commercially registered antiviral formulations, and physical treatments.

- (3) Feasibility of the transfer from contaminated surfaces to foods consumed without a presumptive kill step and those that are ready-to-eat.
- (4) Decline dynamics and kinetics on surfaces of foods consumed without a kill step and ready-to-eat foods, held under conditions that would be typical for commercial refrigerated storage, individually quick-frozen processing, long- and short-distance transportation and retail display.
- (5) Persistence in homogenized food matrices over a pH range typical for these foods.
- (6) Time course of persistence/decline in soil, feces, water (with and without antimicrobial treatment) and the feasibility of transfer from soil, feces, and water to edible commodities.

We understand that there are multiple mechanisms to support these research efforts, for example through Food Safety and Defense (A1332) program or through rapid response programs.

We request that reviews of these proposals are expedited and that funds are disbursed in a manner that will be conducive to obtaining actionable data as soon as possible for the public health practitioners, food service businesses, logistics companies and others along the supply chain to make science-based decisions.

Food industries and their trade associations are standing ready to do our part to provide safe and nutritious foods to American consumers and our trading partners. But the industry and trade associations need reliable data to proceed. We depend on a meaningful partnership with the federal funding agencies, academic and public researchers to provide robust data for making timely decisions that will benefit us all.

Signed by:



**Produce Marketing Association**

PMA includes 2,900 member companies that represent the entire produce and floral supply chain in 54 countries

**United Fresh Produce Association**

United Fresh members represent the full breadth of the produce supply chain since 1904, from small family businesses to large international corporations



**California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement**

California LGMA is an organization of farmers, its members are responsible for ~90% of leafy greens grown in the United States.

**American Frozen Foods Institute**

The American Frozen Food Institute (AFFI) represents America's frozen food and beverage makers. Our members are farmers, fruit and vegetable growers, makers of prepared meals, suppliers and distributors that provide over 670,000 American jobs.

