U.S. Specialty Crop Industry Reacts to USDA Direct Payment Plan

WASHINGTON, D.C. (May 19, 2020) – The leaders of a national coalition of organizations representing specialty crop producers reacted to the details of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s direct payment program for farmers and ranchers impacted by COVID-19.

Tom Stenzel, President & CEO, United Fresh Produce Association
“We applaud the announcement of a direct payment program for fruit and vegetable growers. That being said, we understand the resource and policy constraints that have been placed on USDA and the Administration and will work closely with Congress on implementing a stronger and more effective program in the next round of discussion with Capitol Hill. It is essential that USDA and Congress focus on programs that target resources for growers, grower-shippers, and others in the produce distribution supply chain that had direct job losses and immediate financial impact from government mandated closures.”

Kam Quarles, CEO, National Potato Council
“Given the scope of this crisis, we knew the initial funding would be insufficient to meet the need of family farms. Based upon the limited resources announced today under this direct payment program, the potato industry is strongly urging Congress to act rapidly to provide more resources and flexibility to fill this huge gap and maintain producers’ livelihoods.”

Dave Puglia, President & CEO, Western Growers
“The Administration is doing what it can to help as many farmers as possible from a limited source of relief funds. The tough part of this is that even with the increased cap on relief payments to individual farmers, the actual losses are far greater for many. By way of example, the average sized lettuce farm in the West is 250 acres and requires about $5,000 per acre to grow the crop. The relief payment cap means the farmer who lost the entire crop when the food service industry was closed will have no relief for all but 50 acres of that loss.

“We appreciate all the Administration has already done, especially on regulatory and administrative challenges, to keep our industry operating through the crisis. I urge the President and Secretary Perdue to closely monitor the full scope of economic damage done to fresh produce growers and other farmers and ranchers, and to work with Congress to close the gap in future COVID-19 relief efforts.”

Mike Joyner, President, Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association
“We appreciate the administration’s efforts to help agriculture overcome many of the challenges we have faced during this pandemic. Florida specialty crop producers experienced devastating losses from the shutdown of the foodservice supply chain and slowdown at retail – losses far greater than the direct payment limits announced today will cover. We will continue to work with Congress and the administration to secure additional relief for hard-hit Florida growers of fresh fruits and vegetables.”

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