

April 23, 2020

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE RE-OPEN FLORIDA TASK FORCE

FROM
AGRICULTURE
COMMISSIONER
NIKKI FRIED



**Florida Department of Agriculture
and Consumer Services**

Commissioner Nicole "Nikki" Fried
FDACS.gov/KeepFloridaGrowing

Governor Ron DeSantis
The Capitol
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April 23, 2020

Governor DeSantis,

As the Constitutional officer responsible for overseeing our state's agriculture industry, and as your colleague on the Florida Cabinet, independently elected by the people of the great state of Florida, I am obliged to provide you with the following recommendations to be considered by the Re-Open Florida Task Force.

Florida's proud agriculture industry is our state's second largest economic driver, and first largest in times of economic downturn, such as the present. Florida's 47,500 farms contribute \$137 billion to our economy, support over two million jobs, and export more than \$4 billion in goods to 164 nations around the globe. Our more than 300 commodities have earned our state the moniker of the "Seasonal Crop State." Florida is the national leader in production value of many household staples including citrus, tomatoes, cucumbers, and green beans, and a leading American producer of bell peppers, strawberries, sweet corn, squash, cabbage, peanuts, and honey, as well as greenhouse and nursery crops.

South Florida alone supplies more than **150 million people** in the eastern U.S. with fresh vegetables from October through May. Without question, Florida agriculture is critical to feeding our families, is an essential part of our economy, and is central to our 500 years of history and heritage.

I speak on behalf of our state's agriculture community in saying that discussion of re-opening our state's economy is incomplete without a full consideration of agricultural issues. To date, the Re-Opening Task Force has designated agriculture as being at low risk of job losses, and having the lowest share of jobs at risk. You also stated yesterday that agriculture is "**downstream**" as related to food issues. These statements do not reflect the gravity of the economic situation for Florida agriculture.

This week, my department released a **COVID-19 Impact Assessment** report detailing more than \$522 million in projected losses for Florida's seasonal produce growers. The data includes losses up to 100 percent of certain crops, and financial losses of \$165 million on tomatoes, \$95 million on watermelon, \$50 million on blueberries, and \$48 million on corn, among other losses. These figures will undoubtedly be accompanied by significant job losses in the agricultural sector and related industries.

In addition, Florida faces high levels of chronic hunger, with 2.8 million Floridians facing food insecurity, including 800,000 children. Reports have indicated that acute hunger may double worldwide by year's end, requiring immediate efforts to strengthen our food supply chain and provide nutrition solutions for vulnerable populations.

Given these significant issues, I strongly recommend that the Re-Opening Task Force consider the following topics and actions to support agriculture, our state's current leading economic driver, as you consider how and when to re-open our state.

Sincerely,



Nicole "Nikki" Fried
Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE RE-OPEN FLORIDA TASK FORCE

TOPIC ONE: Federal Support *Leveraging Federal Relationships*

The majority of resources to help Florida agriculture recover will come from the federal government. It is critical to secure increased, meaningful federal support to assist our farmers, ranchers, and agricultural producers. I recommend action on the following:

1. Improving the USDA Coronavirus Food Assistance Program: Last week, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), a \$19 billion relief program funded through the recent CARES Act stimulus package. While this program includes \$16 billion in direct assistance for farmers, only \$2.1 billion is allocated towards the nation's seasonal produce growers specifically, and this funding will do little for Florida's most vulnerable agriculture businesses.

The CFAP relief is anticipated to contain payment limitations of \$125,000 per commodity with an overall limit of \$250,000 per individual or entity. This is of serious concern to producers across agricultural sectors and the country. Because of this, seasonal crop growers will only receive assistance covering a small fraction of their losses. Many specialty crop farmers are facing six-figure losses daily in the current environment, potentially meeting the program's lifetime payment limitation in a single day. Numerous producers have already lost millions of dollars' worth of fruit, vegetables, and dairy products. In addition, these payments are not expected to be delivered until the end of May at the earliest, while losses continue to mount and by which time the harvest season has already ended for many seasonal crops. I wrote to USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue on these matters this week in a letter which [you may find here](#).

Action: I recommend you encourage the President and USDA to increase the CFAP payment limitation, accelerate payments, and prioritize assistance for seasonal crop growers.

2. Reconsidering other USDA actions: In the past two weeks, the USDA announced actions that are detrimental to Florida's farmers, particularly during COVID-19. On April 13, the USDA announced that for 60 days, Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) enforcement actions will be suspended. While I appreciate the intent of allowing our agriculture producers to redirect products from foodservice sales to retail establishments, this could create unintended consequences by opening the door to potential abuse by foreign competitors. Further, the USDA announced it would allow imports of fresh citrus from China. In addition to harming the domestic citrus industry by increasing foreign competition, this action poses serious risk to the health of Florida's citrus industry and many other valuable crops due to the potential introduction of devastating invasive pests and diseases found in China. In the past 15 years, Florida's citrus industry has seen a production drop of 75 percent due to huanglongbing (HLB), commonly known as citrus greening, which originated in China. I wrote to Secretary Perdue on this matter in a letter which [you may find here](#).

Action: I recommend you encourage the President and USDA to rescind these misguided proposals that are detrimental to the domestic produce industry.

3. Encourage more federal purchases: The USDA recently announced it would utilize \$873 million in available Section 32 funding along with a new \$3 billion purchase and distribution program as part of CFAP to ensure food banks and nutrition programs have the necessary commodities to feed families. While the timing of these purchases appears to come too late for Florida's seasonal produce growers, it will provide much-needed relief for Florida's dairy farmers and processors who have been forced to dump an estimated 10 million gallons of milk due to reduced foodservice demand. **While I have worked** to connect dairy processors with cold storage and transport options, increased federal purchases of these products will greatly assist the industry. Florida's vibrant \$100 million aquaculture industry is also seriously impacted, with direct sales to restaurants a major market for fresh seafood and shellfish now closed due to COVID-19. While direct aquaculture relief will be administered through a forthcoming U.S. Department of Commerce program, Florida's aquaculturists impacted by these market disruptions must have access to the USDA purchase programs.

Action: I recommend you encourage the USDA to exercise additional federal purchasing power to purchase Florida-grown produce, dairy, meat, seafood, and other commodities.

4. Continue processing H-2A visas: When President Trump controversially announced he would suspend all immigration into the U.S. due to COVID-19, it created uncertainty for domestic agriculture that relies on workers with H-2A visas, until the program was exempted from the President's edict. Agricultural operations cannot afford to be interrupted by such decisions, as was the case with initial consulate closures earlier this year, which is **why I communicated** to Florida's Congressional delegation the importance of continued H-2A visa processing.

Action: I recommend you encourage the President and U.S. Department of State to continue the expeditious processing of H-2A visas necessary for domestic agricultural harvesting and processing to continue without workforce disruptions.

5. Finalize Hurricane Michael block grant: Following **our announcements** of \$380 million in USDA block grants for timber producers and irrigation infrastructure last fall, there has been disappointingly little action in moving forward towards distributing these funds so desperately needed by the affected communities. As you may know, timber is Florida's largest agricultural commodity, providing \$25 billion in economic impact and supporting 124,000 jobs. Our Florida Forest Service team remains ready to provide the assistance necessary for distribution of the federal aid.

Action: I recommend you encourage the USDA to swiftly finalize criteria for administering and distributing the Hurricane Michael block grant funding as soon as possible.

6. Maintain increased SNAP benefits: Your administration recently submitted a federal waiver to temporarily increase benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for all families to the maximum allowable amount. Given the likelihood of both high unemployment and multiple waves of COVID-19 transmission impacting our workforce, these benefits should remain at the maximum amount for the foreseeable future. This federal nutrition assistance is critical for families; as you may know, **my department is working together** with the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) to implement a pandemic EBT program, allowing families whose children are eligible for free and reduced-price school lunch to receive SNAP benefits.

Action: I recommend you maintain SNAP benefits at the maximum allowable amount for the foreseeable future and seek additional federal waivers if needed to do so.

TOPIC TWO: State Support *Investing in Florida's Recovery*

Florida's state government response to re-opening our economy must be steady, transparent, and inclusive of all sectors of our economy, including our current largest economic driver, agriculture. Now is the time to make sound investments in our state's future, and to take insightful, well-reasoned government actions. For example, I recently issued Emergency Order 2020-006 to **temporarily waive** certain labeling requirements for eggs in Florida, helping move these perishable products to retailers faster without sacrificing quality or safety, an action that benefits both farmers and consumers. My department also recently launched Florida Farm To You, a commodities exchange directly connecting agricultural producers, buyers, consumers, and food banks. This initiative drew over 300,000 visits in its first week, and **was called** "an ingenious (and low-cost) attempt to rewire supply chains." There are numerous state actions that will assist with the agriculture sector's economic recovery. I recommend action on the following:

1. Extend trucking weight waivers: I was pleased to issue recommendations to the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) to waive size and weight restrictions for trucks carrying necessary agricultural commodities, including livestock, milk and milk products, vegetables, rice, sugar, poultry and poultry products, and forestry products. FDOT issued these weight waivers effective March 27; I later recommended an extension to May 8, which became effective on April 9. These waivers allow for more expeditious transport of perishable commodities from farms to processors and retailers.

Action: I recommend directing FDOT to extend these weight waivers if conditions persist necessitating expediting trucking from farms. I also recommend that the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, a state agency jointly overseen by the Florida Cabinet, continue waiving enforcement of Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations, including maximum driving hours, for motor carriers and drivers providing assistance in support of COVID-19 relief efforts.

2. Replenish Small Business Emergency Bridge Loans: While an excellent concept, the execution of Florida's Small Business Emergency Bridge Loan program recently **came under criticism** for closing applications and exhausting funds too quickly while not awarding loans to a sufficient breadth of small businesses, with less than 1,000 entities receiving assistance despite 38,000 applicants. This program should be replenished as quickly as possible and new policies implemented to ensure a broader spectrum of businesses are able to participate. This is particularly important for agriculture, as **Florida Chamber of Commerce data** indicates that 91 percent of agricultural enterprises are classified as small businesses.

Action: I recommend you swiftly replenish the Small Business Emergency Bridge Loan program and establish a more transparent, inclusive method of distribution.

3. Increase Florida commodity purchases by state agencies: Florida's state agencies with foodservice responsibilities should immediately look to increase their purchases of Florida-grown commodities. Just this month, my department, in partnership with the Dade County Farm Bureau and Senator Jeff Brandes, secured a commitment from the Florida Department of Corrections to purchase 389,000 pounds of Florida-grown produce from suppliers in Homestead and Belle Glade. This partnership distributed 13,227 cases of fresh produce to 35 state correctional facilities with an estimated cost savings to the state of \$23,733.

Action: I recommend you instruct state agencies under your purview to seek opportunities to increase the procurement of Florida-grown commodities where possible.

4. Increase funding for the Florida Agricultural Promotional Campaign: The state's agricultural promotional campaign, better known as Fresh From Florida, is an **extraordinary return on investment**, creating \$22 in economic impact for every \$1 invested. Fresh From Florida has generated \$7 billion in economic impact over the past three decades, and creates \$137 million in annual cash receipts for Florida growers, as well as \$840 million from trade shows since 2013. The program is highly effective in helping Florida's agriculture industry market commodities internationally, reaching 50 million consumers yearly. The consumer awareness generated by Fresh From Florida will become even more critical with the sudden downturn of demand from foodservice channels. However, legislative budget requests of just \$5 million in addition to base budget have gone unfunded in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 legislative sessions.

Action: I recommend you approve an allocation of at least \$5 million in LBR funding for the Fresh From Florida agricultural promotional program in addition to base budget.

5. Ensure farmworkers can access PPE and healthcare: Farmworkers are on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic, yet these essential workers are among the most vulnerable. Less than half of all farmworkers **have health insurance**, including just 24 percent of undocumented farmworkers. Farmworkers also frequently lack access to personal protective equipment (PPE), despite increased risk of respiratory illness from occupational hazards that increases their susceptibility to COVID-19 complications. A **coalition of farmworker advocates** recently noted that Florida is a base state in agriculture, with a population of up to 200,000 farmworkers in communities throughout the state. My department recently issued **food supply chain worker safety guidance** in both English and Spanish.

Action: I recommend you join me in working with the agriculture industry to ensure farmworkers have access to adequate PPE like face coverings **as recommended** by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, are able to practice social distancing from fields to packing houses, and can access adequate healthcare and COVID-19 testing.

TOPIC THREE: Workforce Support

Stabilizing Florida's Working Families

Florida's diverse, talented workforce is the heart of our state's \$1.1 trillion economy, with 10 million workers powering 439,000 businesses. But with COVID-19 causing skyrocketing unemployment, Florida's workforce will need our state's full measure of support to recover their financial, emotional, and physical health. One of the Re-Opening Task Force's top priorities must be stabilizing Florida's working families – including our farm families – and ensuring access to adequate resources, particularly for vulnerable populations and rural communities. My department **has worked** to connect individuals and small businesses with state and federal economic assistance resources. There are several key actions Florida's state government should undertake to achieve this. I recommend action on the following:

1. Improve Florida's unemployment system: The **shortcomings** of Florida's current ability to accept, process, and fulfill applications for unemployment assistance are well-documented. But the challenges extend beyond failures of technology and include deficiencies in personnel, funding, and criteria. Florida's unemployment system would be improved by the following:

a. Allocate additional human resources: Adding **1,500 call center workers** at a cost of \$110 million to process 1.5 million claims for unemployment assistance is an important first step that should be maintained throughout the pandemic. This should include utilizing existing state resources; my department twice offered to cross-train and provide call center employees from our Divisions of Consumer Services and Licensing, but was told the assistance was not necessary. Ramping up call center staffing is critical to providing timely assistance on which Floridians are counting.

b. Increase unemployment assistance benefits: Florida's unemployment benefits and duration of those benefits rank among the **five lowest states** in the nation at just \$275 per week for 13 weeks – yet several Florida metro areas rank among the nation's highest cost of living, including Jacksonville, Sarasota, and Orlando. Florida should **immediately increase** the rate and duration of unemployment benefits to provide relief for the staggering number of Floridians now out of work.

c. Ease unemployment assistance eligibility: Florida's unemployment system has long been plagued by needlessly burdensome eligibility hurdles. Now, when Floridians need this assistance most, I join **numerous members** of Florida's Congressional delegation in recommending the state waive waiting periods and update eligibility formulas and criteria.

Action: I recommend that you swiftly improve Florida's unemployment system by raising staffing to appropriate levels, including the use of existing state call center workers where possible, increase unemployment benefits and their duration, and relax eligibility for unemployment assistance and eliminate needless hurdles to receiving the assistance Floridians need now.

2. Address needs of vulnerable populations: COVID-19 poses a greater economic and public health risk to some Florida communities more than others. These are most often predominantly communities of color that have consistently battled social inequities prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pre-pandemic, many of these communities were food insecure. A lack of consistent access to nutritious food leads to an increased risk of developing underlying health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, and hypertension. These conditions weaken the body's immune and respiratory systems, creating greater vulnerability to COVID-19.

Action: I recommend that your administration apply for permission to give WIC and SNAP

beneficiaries additional flexibility to purchase a wider range of foods and non-covered necessities, including toiletries and cleaning supplies. I also recommend you enact rules for the authorization of emergency SNAP benefits, similar to those authorized following a natural disaster.

3. Support rural health and mental health access: Shifting socioeconomic dynamics have led to **significant health and behavioral health disparities** for rural communities compared with urban counterparts, including higher rates of suicide and depression. This was true even before the health and economic difficulties presented by COVID-19, with farmers and ranchers facing a suicide rate **3.5 times higher** than the general population. Meanwhile, over 40 percent of rural hospitals in Florida are **vulnerable to closure**. This is **why I asked** Florida's Congressional delegation to support the bipartisan Seeding Rural Resilience Act, which would enhance training and awareness of rural mental health issues.

Action: I recommend your administration work with my department to develop a statewide rural health initiative, including support for rural hospitals and rural mental health awareness, as well as other actions that increase the availability of health and mental health services available to rural and agricultural communities.

4. Invest in rural broadband infrastructure: Telehealth presents significant opportunities to address the physical and mental health needs of our rural population. This is **why I wrote** to Congressional leadership in support of prioritizing investment in broadband internet in rural communities. As telehealth, telework, distance learning, and other internet-based services become more commonplace, rural citizens will become more disadvantaged relative to urban residents. With children in rural communities pursuing K-12 distance learning without sufficient rural internet access, it is especially important to begin expanding this infrastructure now, given the potential for a subsequent wave of COVID-19 transmission this fall. Supporting both federal and state investment in rural broadband will create better economic, educational, and health outcomes for rural communities.

Action: I recommend you sign into law **CS/HB 969** by Representatives Ausley and Drake and the House Transportation and Tourism Appropriations Subcommittee to establish a Florida Office of Broadband and facilitate expansion of broadband service in rural, unserved, and underserved Florida communities. I also recommend that the state apply for USDA ReConnect Program loan and/or grant funding for rural broadband infrastructure, for which an additional \$100 million was included in the recent CARES Act. Finally, I also recommend that the state apply for USDA Distance Learning and Telemedicine (DLT) Grant funding for rural broadband investment, for which an additional \$25 million was included in the recent CARES Act.

IN CONCLUSION:

Florida continues to face an enormous economic and public health threat from COVID-19, a threat which may persist through the upcoming influenza season and well into 2021. Our state, our economy, and our people may continue to look different in the months and years to come. I remain hopeful that by following a science-based approach to re-opening our state, guided by leading public health experts, Floridians may rebound as quickly as possible from this unprecedented, intergenerational challenge.

For our state's agriculture industry, much is at stake. With tourism at a standstill, agriculture is Florida's largest industry and the backbone of our state's economy. Florida's farms and ranches support 1,616,235 full and part-time direct jobs, plus 655,877 indirect jobs in other sectors, accounting for 19.8 percent of all Florida jobs. Many thousands of these jobs are highly vulnerable, based on sharp declines to farm revenue and the threat of COVID-19 spread in close worker proximity.

The actions the Re-Opening Task Force, your administration, and we as state leaders take today will determine the strength of Florida agriculture tomorrow and in the years ahead. These actions will also chart a course for Florida's consumers, vulnerable populations, and working families facing an uncertain future.

As Florida's Commissioner of Agriculture, I have seen first-hand the resilience and determination of our agriculture community, and the spirit of the Sunshine State in our residents. As the Re-Opening Task Force considers these recommendations, and as we work for the betterment of all Floridians, I am hopeful that together, we will keep Florida growing.

I encourage you to visit us online at FDACS.gov/KeepFloridaGrowing.



Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

Commissioner Nicole "Nikki" Fried
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