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April 21, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pence
Vice President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. Vice President,

I would first like to thank you for your leadership to help get our country through this incredibly difficult time. I would like to bring to your attention concerns I am hearing from the agriculture and food industries in my state. Now more than ever it is important that we make sure our farmers have the resources they need to survive this crisis, so that Americans can continue to have food on their kitchen table.

While every sector has been greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, developments in the last week have dramatically changed the condition of our food supply chain. In Iowa alone, there have been several major packing plant closures due to their hardworking employees being infected by COVID-19. These companies have been faced with the difficult task of temporarily closing their facilities and protecting the health of their employees. Packing plants and the entire agriculture industry have long faced labor challenges, and COVID-19 related plant shutdowns and rising worker absenteeism has intensified these issues.

When a packing plant closes, it sends ripple effects through the supply chain. In the case of Iowa's pork industry, there is a constant supply of pigs working their way up the chain. If the packing plant is no longer open for slaughter, farmers have to hold on to those pigs for longer, which means the pigs are putting on extra weight, and new piglets have no place to go. Ultimately farmers are left with an excess supply of hogs that they are not getting any money for. Excess supply paired with lower demand has consequently led to some farmers losing in excess of \$40 per head. On the other end of the supply chain, when a packing plant closes it means less meat going towards our grocery store shelves and higher prices for consumers.

Iowa's pork industry is in dire straits. With a system designed for just-in-time delivery, the pork industry has been turned on its head. Soon, farmers will need to start euthanizing hogs, meaning they are literally throwing out their livelihoods.

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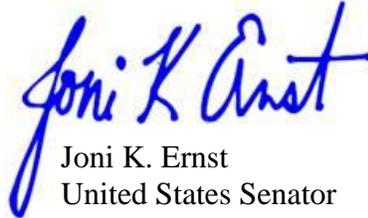
This all comes after several years of market turmoil due to lost markets and a significant drop in value from trade retaliation measures. It is estimated that hog farmers will lose \$5 billion collectively during the remainder of this year. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, a profitable year had been expected.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act passed by Congress and signed into law on March 27th includes several provisions for assistance to agriculture. USDA has been given the ability to help, they can make purchases and design emergency payments. Now more than ever, we must protect the integrity of our food supply from farmer to grocery shelf using an all-hands-on deck approach. As the response to COVID-19 moves forward, please remember the impact of these closures. A plant closure does not just affect the employees working the line and their families, but it reaches all the way back to the farmer and forward to the consumer.

This pandemic has put unprecedented strains on supply chains. Farmers, producers, and businesses are being forced to interact with government agencies they never have before. In my conversations with Iowans, they've consistently stressed the importance of a coordinated effort when it comes to the way the federal government is providing resources, educating, and informing the public about the status of the food supply chain. Moving forward, I would ask that the administration consider all the tools it has – that could include designating a supply chain point-person – to help ensure that Iowa's producers are able to reliably and safely get their products to market. It is imperative that we have a streamlined, collaborative strategy in order to respond to the market changes and keep the integrity of our supply chains. This means helping facilitate interagency efforts to clear the way to keep our supply chains up and running and delivering critical goods, like food, to our nation's consumers.

Again I would like to thank you for all your effort in guiding our nation through this crisis. I encourage you to develop strong measures to help mitigate the current market upheaval in the pork industry as it weathers this crisis.

Sincerely,



Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator