

**RANKING MINORITY MEMBER**  
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**THE SENATE  
STATE OF NEW YORK**



**ROBERT G. ORTT**  
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April 13, 2020

United States Department of Agriculture  
Secretary Sonny Perdue  
1400 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

It's a difficult time for the dairy industry in New York State. Data released by your agency last year shows the number of farm closures in New York State was triple the national average between 2012-2017, with dairy farmers shutting their doors at a particularly alarming rate. It is no wonder considering that New York farm labor costs have increased 39 percent between 2007 and 2017. Despite that disturbing data, our Democratic majority passed the misguided Farm Laborers Fair Labor Practices Act, which exacerbates farm labor costs and is yet another blow to the financial viability of farming in the Empire State.

The COVID-19 outbreak is the latest threat in what's been a very difficult decade for New York dairy. With the government-mandated closure of restaurants, schools, and other vendors, dairy farmers have lost most of their clientele. With consistent supply but drastically-reduced demand, milk prices and futures have plummeted, forcing some New York farmers to dump their product to balance supply and demand. This year's state budget also saw Democrats cut life-saving mental health services (FarmNet) for farmers in need.

New York dairy farmers need urgent assistance. To be clear, they are not looking for a handout, and they are not in this grim position because of their own failure. Government action to respond to COVID-19 – while necessary – has artificially eliminated the natural demand for dairy products, so it is the duty of government to rectify the situation and help dairy farmers remain financially viable in this difficult time. For this reason, we look to USDA for help.

The recently-passed CARES Act appropriates \$9.5 billion to USDA, and we urge you to use that funding for direct financial assistance to farms who have faced harm because of COVID-19. Additionally, we urge the Department to make purchases of dairy products like fluid milk, butter, cheeses, and dry milk powders. Direct commodity support and export assistance would also help farms manage their decreased domestic demand.

At a time when so many Americans are out of work, more individuals are turning to food pantries for their next meal. However, many food pantries lack cold storage space to keep milk products fresh. This is an excellent opportunity to create a voucher program for people in need through the Milk Donation Program, as authorized under the 2018 Farm Bill, to facilitate the distribution of donated milk through grocery stores and other venues. Doing so would help poor Americans keep food on the table, and also add demand for dairy farmers.


Of course, dairy is not the only agricultural subsector being harmed by COVID-19. Fresh produce growers, livestock farms, horticulturalists, craft distilleries, maple producers, and many others are all financially strained, and we urge you to take similar actions to bolster their businesses, too.

Agriculture is the cornerstone of our society, and making sure our food supply chain remains strong should be a top priority throughout this pandemic. We urge you to take action to protect farms in New York and across the United States. Thank you for your continued efforts, and please reach out to our offices if you wish to discuss this further.

Sincerely,



Robert G. Ort  
Senator, 62<sup>nd</sup> District  
Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture



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Senator, 51<sup>st</sup> District



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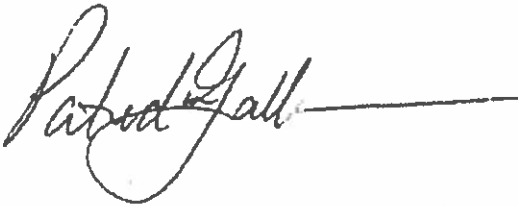
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Patricia Ritchie  
Senator, 48<sup>th</sup> District



Christopher Jacobs  
Senator, 60<sup>th</sup> District



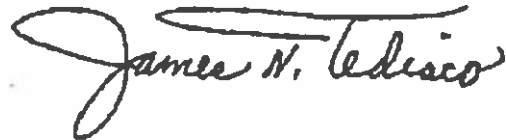
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CC:

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Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer  
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Rep. Tom Reed  
Rep. Brian Higgins  
Rep. Joseph Morelle  
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