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Dear Secretary Perdue,

Your longtime promise to “[do right and feed everyone](#)” is laudable, particularly amid this harrowing global pandemic. But the current structure of much of our nation’s agricultural system—particularly poultry farming—is built on predatory contracts that trap small family farmers and leave them in immense debt. We urge you to allocate CARES Act funding to solutions that will not only protect our nation’s health, safety, and economic security during this pandemic but help create a sustainable, compassionate food system for the future.

Take Mike Weaver, a West Virginia farmer who used to raise chickens for Pilgrim’s Pride. Mike left the poultry industry and repurposed his chicken houses to grow hemp. He did this to escape a system where large companies own everything except the property where chickens are raised. Farmers take out huge loans to finance equipment and sheds, and they struggle to pay these debts with the money they earn in a tournament system with other growers. Income is unpredictable, and contracts often require extensive upgrades to equipment, resulting in even more loans. A 2011 analysis of the industry showed contract chicken farmers working off [\\$5.2 billion in debt](#).

Mike is an inspiring model of what a farmer can accomplish once free from this unfair system. As he puts it, “The question we want to ask ourselves is do we want our food concentrated into these mega operations, or do we want family farmers to stay in business?” When asked about where CARES funding could make the most difference, Mike recalled the chicken farmer’s plight. He also said the funds could “be a tremendous aid” to dairy farmers going under. “It could help them transition to making a sustainable product that they can make a living off of, one that would help them feed their kids,” he said. “I’d much rather see the funding go there than to big agriculture.” Many farmers looking to transition currently operate concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), which heavily pollute air and water. Transitioning away from this model and into growing plants for sustainable products would contribute to the USDA’s stated goal of cutting farming’s environmental footprint in half by 2050.

A food system that disadvantages family farmers, some of the very people who hold the nation together in times of crisis, is one that needs reform. We ask that CARES Act funding be allocated to the following solutions:

- Building the more compassionate and sustainable systems we all need to survive—specifically, funding should be allocated to helping farmers trapped in restrictive

contracts get out of debt so they can repurpose their equipment to grow more sustainable crops for plant-based foods.

- Ensuring that crops from farms are accessible and available to all communities—now more than ever, we see the need for food that promotes and protects our health. Increased consumption of fruits and vegetables, for instance, can help prevent [cardiovascular disease](#) and [diabetes](#).

As grim as the current situation may seem, we have an opportunity to rewrite the rules and restructure our food system to be more sustainable, supportive, and compassionate.

It is time to free farmers from industrial farmed animal production and help them become co-creators of a new food future by transitioning to plant-focused farming. Please allocate CARES Act funding to that end. We must act now, before it is too late.

Respectfully,
Leah Garcés
President
The Transformation Project
A program of Mercy For Animals