

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 19, 2023

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Zach Ducheneaux
Administrator
Farm Service Agency
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Administrator Ducheneaux:

We write on behalf of communities impacted by recent storms and flooding in Massachusetts. Our constituents have detailed costly damage to farms throughout Western Massachusetts caused by flooding throughout the Northeast on July 9 and 10.¹ We are grateful to the first responders, local, and state officials who have worked to keep residents safe and respond to community members in need, and while we are grateful for the support that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) have provided thus far, we write to request that you make every effort to support local recovery efforts in Massachusetts communities.

Our Commonwealth has a vibrant farming community that serves a vital role in our culture and economy. However, the relentless flooding this month caused “worst-case scenario” damage,² affecting at least 75 farms, destroying over 1,000 acres of crops, and

¹ Boston Herald, “More than 1,000 Acres of Crops Destroyed in Massachusetts by Storms, Floods,” Chris Van Buskirk, July 14, 2023, <https://www.bostonherald.com/2023/07/14/more-than-1000-acres-of-crops-destroyed-in-massachusetts-by-storms-floods/>.

² Western Mass News, “Easthampton Farm Faces ‘Worst-Case Scenario’ after Recent Flooding,” Kristin Burnell, July 13, 2023, <https://www.westernmassnews.com/2023/07/13/easthampton-farms-faces-worst-case-scenario-after-recent-flooding/>.

creating possibly \$10 million in crop loss, with potential for more long-term damage.³ The flooding occurred just as the crops were ready to be harvested, exacerbating the damage.⁴ Mike Antonellis, who farms in Deerfield and Adams, initially estimated that he had lost as much as 90 percent of his crop to the flood, translating to around \$400,000 in losses, or about half of his annual revenue.⁵ Farmers across the region have expressed that they urgently need financial assistance and guidance for how to access available resources to aid in the recovery process.

In light of the profound harm to the farming community, we request that you use the full authority of the Department of Agriculture to assist the farmers and community members who have been impacted by this disaster in Western Massachusetts. Specifically, we ask that FSA quickly request, and that Secretary Vilsack rapidly approve, a designation of the impacted counties as disaster areas.⁶ Doing so will allow affected farmers in these communities to quickly access funds, including FSA's Emergency Loan program and other FSA assistance programs, for flood clean up and to address damage from erosion.⁷

In order to rapidly assist farmers and communities in need, we ask that you expeditiously process and approve the request and engage in public outreach, including ensuring that FSA, Natural Resource Conservation Services, and Rural Development staff engage directly with affected farmers and communities, and that USDA enable a dedicated public website and community forums to ensure that affected communities in Massachusetts

³ Boston Herald, "More than 1,000 Acres of Crops Destroyed in Massachusetts by Storms, Floods," Chris Van Buskirk, July 14, 2023, <https://www.bostonherald.com/2023/07/14/more-than-1000-acres-of-crops-destroyed-in-massachusetts-by-storms-floods/>; WBUR, "Many Farms in Western Mass. May See Extended Damage as Flood Watch Continues," John Bender and Irina Matchavariani, July 14, 2023, <https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/07/14/western-massachusetts-farms-flood-crop>.

⁴ Greenfield Recorder, "Federal Lawmakers Meet with Farmers, Speak to Post-Flood Support," Bella Levavi, July 16, 2023, <https://www.recorder.com/Federal-lawmakers-meet-with-farmers-speak-to-post-flood-support-51651870>.

⁵ This estimate has been updated, and remains in flux: "his number has shifted to about 50%, though it could continue to fluctuate as the farm assesses the flooding's impact throughout the year." Greenfield Recorder, "Federal Lawmakers Meet with Farmers, Speak to Post-Flood Support," Bella Levavi, July 16, 2023, <https://www.recorder.com/Federal-lawmakers-meet-with-farmers-speak-to-post-flood-support-51651870>; Boston Globe, "Warren, McGovern Visit Farms Affected by Flooding," Laura Crimaldi, July 15, 2023, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/07/15/metro/warren-mcgovern-visit-farms-affected-by-flooding/>.

⁶ 7 CFR § 759 (2012); U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Disaster Assistance: Emergency Disaster Declaration and Declaration Process," https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Assets/USDA-FSA-Public/usdafiles/FactSheets/emergency_disaster_designation_declaration_process-factsheet.pdf.

⁷ U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Disaster Assistance: Emergency Disaster Declaration and Declaration Process," https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Assets/USDA-FSA-Public/usdafiles/FactSheets/emergency_disaster_designation_declaration_process-factsheet.pdf; Emergency Conservation Program, <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/emergency-conservation/index>.

are aware of the help available to them. We also ask that USDA officials provide us with a staff-level briefing on the status of the disaster declaration, available assistance, and outreach efforts by July 28, 2023.

We thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Richard E. Neal
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress