

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 29, 2023

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
Senate Appropriations Committee
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Susan Collins
Vice Chair
Senate Appropriations Committee
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader Schumer, Minority Leader McConnell, Chair Murray, and Vice Chair Collins:

We write to urge you to support disaster assistance to compensate Massachusetts farmers for crop losses from recent extreme weather events in any end-of-year appropriations package Congress considers.

Specifically, we request your support for disaster funding for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to compensate farmers for crop losses caused by tornadoes, floods, freezes, and frosts. We urge that at least \$55 million for Massachusetts farmers be included in the amount appropriated to USDA for disaster relief. While this funding is not part of the Continuing Resolution package, it must be part of an end-of-year appropriations package.

2023 has already proven to be an exceptionally challenging year for Massachusetts farmers. In July, catastrophic flooding damaged over 100 farms in western Massachusetts at one of the worst possible times in the season: after the majority of crops had been planted and before they were ready to be harvested.¹ The flooding also affected dairy farmers who had to dump milk due to impassable roads.² The July floods were followed by flash floods in August and September 2023 that destroyed additional farms and made this year the second worst summer of rainfall on record in Massachusetts.³ And the state's farms suffered not only flooding in the summer, but also frost

1 Boston 25 News, "'It's such a waste, all that food': Western Mass. farmers try rebooting after epic floods," Jim Morelli, August 10, 2023, <https://www.boston25news.com/news/local/its-such-waste-all-that-food-western-mass-farmers-try-rebooting-after-epic-floods/NIPZBBRIGJBQVMLPTNUCA77VVO/>.

2 CBS News Boston, "Floods devastate 'heartbroken' farmers as months of labor and crops are swept away," Steve LeBlanc, July 21, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/boston/news/floods-devastate-heartbroken-farmers-massachusetts-vermont/>

3 WBUR, "It's been a summer of rain and flooding misery in Mass.," Beth Healy, September 12, 2023, <https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/09/12/summer-flooding-rain-massachusetts>; CBS News Boston, "'We lost everything': Lancaster refugee farm destroyed by flooding," Christina Hager, September 18, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/boston/news/lancaster-refugee-flats-mentor-farm-destroyed-flooding/>

and freezing earlier this year: in May 2023, unseasonably late frost wiped out virtually all of some farmers' crops.⁴ And in February 2023, an arctic freeze destroyed some farms' ability to grow fruit for the year.⁵

All together, this year's extreme weather events ruined nearly 3,000 acres of crops in the state,⁶ and initial estimates by USDA's Farm Service Agency reflect that farmers collectively lost roughly \$49 million in crops. Many lost virtually all of their crops for the year, gutting their financial security.⁷ For example, some refugee farmers in the state work with a program that supports them to sell their crops in order to earn an income, but they have been unable to sell produce this year.⁸ Farmers continue to accrue additional losses; some have not yet been able to repair farmland and others have seen floods introduce bacterial infections into their farms, preventing replanting.⁹ The damage has undermined not only farmers' livelihoods, but also the food security of surrounding communities that depend on the farms.¹⁰

Recognizing the severe damage to Massachusetts farms, USDA designated seven Massachusetts counties as natural disaster areas in July 2023.¹¹ This designation unlocked low-interest loans for farmers, and access to the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP), a cost-share program that covers 75 to 90 percent of the cost of repairing damaged farmland.¹²

4 WBUR, "After spring freezes wiped out apples, peaches and more, N.H. farmers pivot to other crops — and new revenue sources," Kate Dario, July 10, 2023, <https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/07/10/spring-freeze-apples-peaches-crops-new-hampshire>.

5 Boston Globe, "Arctic freeze damages Massachusetts fruit crop," Ashley Soebroto, February 14, 2023, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/02/14/metro/recent-frigid-temperatures-damaged-peach-crops-massachusetts/>.

6 WBUR, "Slammed by climate emergencies, Mass. farmers ask, 'Now what?'," Barbara Moran, August 9, 2023, <https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/08/09/massachusetts-farms-2023-frost-floods-climate-change>.

7 WBUR, "Gov. Healey launches fundraiser to help flooded farms," Chris Lisinski, July 20, 2023, <https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/07/20/healey-massachusetts-farm-resiliency-fund>; WBUR, "Many farms in western Mass. may see extended damage as flood watch continues," John Bender, July 14, 2023, <https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/07/14/western-massachusetts-farms-flood-crop>.

8 CBS News Boston, "'We lost everything': Lancaster refugee farm destroyed by flooding," Christina Hager, September 18, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/boston/news/lancaster-refugee-flats-mentor-farm-destroyed-flooding/>.

9 Boston Globe, "Devastated farms tally losses from Western Mass. flooding," Sarah Raza and Brian MacQuarrie, July 19, 2023, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/07/19/metro/flooding-farms-western-massachusetts-produce/>;

Boston 25 News, "'It's such a waste, all that food': Western Mass. farmers try rebooting after epic floods," Jim Morelli, August 10, 2023, <https://www.boston25news.com/news/local/its-such-waste-all-that-food-western-mass-farmers-try-rebooting-after-epic-floods/NIPZBBRIGJBOVMLPTNUCA77VVQ/>; CBS News Boston, "'We lost everything': Lancaster refugee farm destroyed by flooding," Christina Hager, September 18, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/boston/news/lancaster-refugee-flats-mentor-farm-destroyed-flooding/>.

10 Daily Hampshire Gazette, "In Easthampton, Mountain View Farm's major CSA crop mostly wiped out," Maddie Fabian, July 12, 2023, <https://www.gazettenet.com/Easthampton-CSA-farm-inundated-51615878>.

11 U.S. Department of Agriculture, "USDA Designates 7 Massachusetts Counties Primary Natural Disaster Areas," <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/state-offices/Massachusetts/news-releases/2023/usda-designates-7-massachusetts-counties-primary-natural-disaster-areas>.

12 U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Emergency Conservation Program," <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/emergency-conservation/index#:~:text=The%20funding%20for%20ECP%20is,to%2090%25%20cost%20share>.

However, USDA loans and cost-share assistance are insufficient to meet the current needs of Massachusetts farms — which are predominantly family-owned and 95 percent of which qualify as small farms.¹³ Many Massachusetts farmers already took on debt in order to plant this year’s crops — for which they earned little to no revenue — and cannot afford to repay additional loans, even at a low interest rate.¹⁴ Additionally, many cannot afford to pay even their minority share of the ECP cost-share program, and those that can are only able to use ECP funds for farmland restoration, not for crop loss compensation. Meanwhile, most of the state’s farmers lack crop insurance, leaving them without access to compensation for these weather-related losses.¹⁵

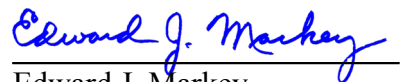
Massachusetts farms are in dire need of grant-based federal aid to compensate for crop loss. We request that Congress appropriate funding to USDA that can be distributed to Massachusetts farmers in the form of direct grants, to compensate for the loss of revenue and quality or production losses of crops (including milk), due to flooding, freeze, tornadoes, and frost. Once appropriated, the funds can be distributed by USDA via the Emergency Relief Program (ERP), which was created in past years to offer crop-loss grants to farmers. Alternatively, Congress could appropriate this funding in the form of a block grant to the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR), which already has established a well-functioning system for distributing funds to individual farmers. MDAR estimates that there has been roughly \$49 million in farm losses in the state — a number that is likely to grow as damage assessments continue. We request federal and state agencies work closely to assess total damages and that at least \$55 million be appropriated for damage already done for Massachusetts farmers.

Thank you for your consideration of our request and for your support of Massachusetts’ response and recovery process.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

¹³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Massachusetts State Office,” <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/state-offices/Massachusetts/index#:~:text=80%25%20of%20our%20farms%20are,are%20beginning%20operations%20each%20year>.

¹⁴ WBUR, “Heavy rains damage crops, homes and flood the Connecticut River in western Mass.,” Colin Young, July 12, 2023, <https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/07/12/heavy-rains-damage-crops-homes-and-flood-the-connecticut-river-in-western-mass>.

¹⁵ *Id.*