

United States Senate

February 1, 2024

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:

As you consider a final package of FY2024 appropriations, we urge you to include robust funding for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to compensate farmers for uncovered losses caused by natural disasters.

We have repeatedly asked Congress to provide disaster assistance for farmers and were pleased that President Biden's October 25, 2023 domestic supplemental funding request included help for farmers and ranchers hit by disaster. However, the President's \$2.8 billion request is woefully insufficient to cover the \$8.5 billion in expected losses incurred nationwide in calendar year 2023. And the \$8.5 billion estimate does not include losses suffered by farmers with whom USDA has not had contact.

In Massachusetts alone, crop losses have resulted in nearly \$50 million in damage, mostly due to historic flooding across western Massachusetts that damaged 1,000 acres of farmland and resulted in near-total crop loss for some farmers. The July floods were followed by flash floods in August and September 2023 that destroyed additional farms — flooding that resulted from the second heaviest summer rainfall on record in Massachusetts.¹ Frost and freezing also hit Massachusetts farmers last year, wiping out virtually all of some farmers' crops and destroying

¹ Beth Healy, *It's been a summer of rain and flooding misery in Mass.*, WBUR (Sept. 12, 2023), <https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/09/12/summer-flooding-rain-massachusetts>, Christina Hager, "We lost everything": Lancaster refugee farm destroyed by flooding, CBS News Boston (Sept. 18, 2023), <https://www.cbsnews.com/boston/news/lancaster-refugee-flats-mentor-farm-destroyed-flooding/>.

some farms' ability to grow fruit for the year.²³ Altogether, last year's extreme weather events ruined nearly 3,000 acres of crops in the state.⁴

Consequently, USDA issued disaster declarations, which unlocked low-interest loans for farmers and provided access to the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP), a cost-share program that covers 75 to 90 percent of the cost of repairing damaged farmland.⁵ But, 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.⁶ Many Massachusetts farmers already took on debt in order to plant last year's crops – for which they earned little to no revenue – and cannot afford to repay additional loans, even at a low interest rate.⁷ Additionally, many Massachusetts farmers cannot afford to pay even their minority share of the ECP cost-share program, and those that can are able to use ECP funds only 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.⁸

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, USDA can distribute the funds through the Emergency Relief Program (ERP), 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 nearly \$49 million in farm losses in the state.

² Kate Dario, *After spring freezes wiped out apples, peaches and more, N.H. farmers pivot to other crops — and new revenue sources*, WBUR (July 10, 2023), <https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/07/10/spring-freeze-apples-peaches-crops-new-hampshire>.

³ Ashley Soebroto, *Arctic freeze damages Massachusetts fruit crop*, Boston Globe (Feb. 14, 2023), <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/02/14/metro/recent-frigid-temperatures-damaged-peach-crops-massachusetts/>.

⁴ Barbara Moran, *Slammed by climate emergencies, Mass. farmers ask, "Now what?"*, WBUR (Aug. 9, 2023), <https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/08/09/massachusetts-farms-2023-frost-floods-climate-change>.

⁵ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farm Service Agency, 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%2Dshare>.

⁶ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farm Service Agency, Massachusetts State Office, <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/state-offices/Massachusetts/index#:~:text=80%25%20of%20our%20farms%20are,are%20beginning%20operations%20each%20year>.

⁷ Colin Young, *Heavy rains damage crops, homes and flood the Connecticut River in western Mass.*, WBUR (July 12, 2023), <https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/07/12/heavy-rains-damage-crops-homes-and-flood-the-connecticut-river-in-western-mass>.

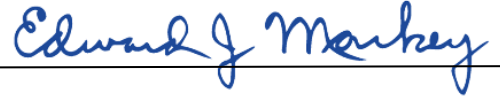
⁸ *Id.*

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Elizabeth Warren", written over a horizontal line.

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Edward J. Markey", written over a horizontal line.

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator