

December 9, 2020

The Honorable Governor Tim Walz  
75 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.  
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Governor Walz,

On behalf of the hundreds of thousands of people who work in Minnesota's food, agriculture and beverage sectors and their retail partners, we thank you and your Administration for the strong leadership demonstrated in leading our state through these unprecedented times. As vaccine relief to the coronavirus appears on the horizon, we are writing to urge you to preserve the essential worker designation adopted by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security as part of the nation's critical infrastructure.

As you know, our sector kept the nation's skeletal economy afloat in the earliest days of the pandemic. Our employees ensured a plentiful food supply in grocery stores and other retail outlets, ensuring Americans had one less thing to worry about during a time of upheaval and uncertainty. These committed men and women have to work throughout the pandemic, and we are all grateful for their hard work and dedication.

However, many of our members continue to struggle to secure adequate access to medical facilities given the rural nature of our agricultural production and processing infrastructure. A single infected employee necessitates that we quarantine additional employees with whom he or she may have been in contact. This leaves critical positions unfilled, overworking existing employees and threatening to shut down processing facilities.

Our industry is proud to have provided our fellow Americans with safe and nutritious foods and beverages over these past nine months. We have taken necessary steps to ensure our workforce is safe, including use of personal protective equipment (PPE), as well as temperature checks, hand washing and social distancing. We also have stepped up to help those who are most vulnerable to the virus within our communities. The signatories below have supported such efforts—from donations to food banks and other charitable organizations to the production of hand sanitizer, face shields and other needed goods.

We believe that it is imperative that agriculture, food and beverage manufacturers and retailers continue to operate as part of critical infrastructure to ensure a safe and readily available food supply. As we head into the winter months, we cannot afford food shortages – or the perception of such. We agree with the recommendations from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASAEM) that employees in these sectors be eligible to receive vaccines in Phase 2, behind healthcare workers, first responders and those populations most vulnerable to the disease. We strongly support this phased approach and feel it is of paramount importance those recommendations be followed.

In addition, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Food & Agricultural Sector Coordinating Council helped ensure that food and agricultural workers were included on the DHS's essential critical infrastructure list at the beginning of the pandemic. With vaccines expected to be approved and made available in a matter of days, this council has discussed to need for front line food and agricultural workers to be included within the initial populations given priority access to the vaccines—just behind health care professionals and elderly/immune-compromised patients.

The DHS, USDA and FDA have also collaborated with the Center for Disease Control (CDC) to develop a recommendation for prioritizing food and agricultural workers within CDC guidance that was released October 29, 2020. This request is supported by not only the CDC's recommendation, but a similar recommendation from NASAEM as was stated above.

Our groups have established strong working relationships with governmental organizations that have coordinated the national, state, and local response to the pandemic. We look forward to continuing that important work in the coming months.

As you develop Minnesota's micro-plan for vaccine distribution, it is critically important that all levels of government prioritize this sector's workers for vaccination. We must ensure that our food supply operates uninterrupted, and we can only do so by ensuring these employees are protected. Thank you for all you are doing to ensure we work together in a coordinated fashion.

Sincerely,



CC: Thom Petersen, Minnesota Department of Agriculture Commissioner  
Jan Malcolm, Minnesota Department of Health Commissioner