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12TH DISTRICT, FLORIDA

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Congress of the United States
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June 7, 2023

The Honorable GT Thompson, Chairman
House Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Thompson:

As you put together the 2023 reauthorization of the Federal Farm Bill I would like to thank you for your diligent efforts to develop a collaborative policy that accounts for our nation's varying agriculture needs. Bearing in mind your encouragement to Members to gather input from our districts, I welcome the opportunity to share feedback from Florida's 12th Congressional District (comprised of Hernando, Citrus and Pasco counties). In that spirit, I recently held a local forum with farmers, ranchers, citrus growers and other agricultural stakeholders from my district and have compiled a list of their top concerns for your consideration:

- There needs to be more geographic neutrality for all USDA programs. Currently, the programs are designed based on standards of loss in the Midwest and West – not Florida. As a result, many of Florida's farmers are shut out. Our stakeholders have advocated for regional benchmarks and localized loss standards so that my constituents, many of whom have been farming for generations, are able to receive their fair share of federal funding designed to support our nation's family farmers.
- USDA programs need to be streamlined and simplified. Constituents unanimously agreed that there are far too many cumbersome steps to try to qualify for assistance and aid. Additionally, they felt as though local USDA offices are not staffed and equipped to provide meaningful support to applicants. The smallest farmers don't have the time or resources to hire someone to help with all the paperwork to qualify for USDA programs and they are being left behind by the very initiatives that aim to help them. They need a Small Business Farmer Ombudsman to help them, especially in rural areas.
- Hurricanes are an obvious and stark reality in the Sunshine State. My constituents report that funds from USDA Hurricane Clean-up and Relief Programs can't be reimbursed until all of the work is done. When the loss has been catastrophic and clean-up extensive, this means that farmers have to advance a significant amount of money and suffer long delays before receiving relief. Allowing for partial reimbursements based on time (such

as quarterly filings) or upon reaching a fixed dollar amount of expenses would be beneficial.

- Care must be made to foster the next generation of farmers. The entry barriers to agriculture are extremely high and third/fourth generation farmers are selling out to real estate investors. There is an impending farm land shortage as well as a shortage of trained future farmers. There should be more programs to encourage/expose students to this business at an early age.
- With the rise of children who suffer from allergies, USDA is spending a great deal of money to provide soy based milk products within the Federal School Lunch program. Local dairy farmers feel left out despite an effective solution in which they can produce lactose free, real milk for the school lunch program at the low cost of 2.5 cents per carton.
- Bureaucracy throughout USDA needs to be streamlined and made more user-friendly. Perhaps using the existing framework of each state's Commissioners of Agriculture to administer federal funding through a block grant style program would maximize flexibility and allow for programs to be better tailored to meet the needs of local farmers.
- While my constituents would prefer that SNAP benefits be separated from the farm bill, they would at least like to see participants in the program incentivized to use their SNAP benefits to purchase locally-sourced farm, fresh food, as opposed to unhealthy processed alternatives.
- Ensuring the long-term security of our country's farmland and our food supply chain is an essential national security concern. There needs to be protection from foreign investment by adversarial countries, and local farmers need support as they seek to safeguard their operations from potential attack, including from cybercrimes.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to share the unique needs of Florida's agriculture industry and I hope this feedback helps inform your efforts and ensures that the final package brought to the Floor accurately reflects the priorities of all our nation's farmers, citrus growers, and ranchers. I appreciate your committee's leadership on this important issue and for your careful consideration of my constituents' priorities. As always, if you have questions or need additional information about these or any other matter impacting Florida's agriculture industry, please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Gus M. Bilirakis".

Gus M. Bilirakis
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Kat Cammack
The Honorable Darren Soto