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## **Testimony from David Fisher, New York Farm Bureau President**

**SUBJECT:** New York State Assembly Hearing on the impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity in New York State.

**PURPOSE:** Examine the effects that financial instability caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has had on food insecurity in New York State.

**DATE:** Wednesday, September 9th, 2020 at 11:00am

**Web Link:** <https://www.nyassembly.gov/av/live/>

My name is David Fisher and I serve as the President of New York Farm Bureau. I am also a dairy farmer, along with my family, in Madrid in St. Lawrence County. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

The issue of food insecurity has always been at the forefront of farmers and New York Farm Bureau minds. In fact, New York farmers have consistently been among the top three states in the amount of food donated to food banks, even though the scale of our agricultural economy is dwarfed by states, such as California and Florida.

As you can imagine, the issue of food security is not just an urban problem. Rural hunger and poverty is a very real issue and I see its impacts every day as I drive my local roads. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the situation much more dire and for both farmers and consumers, but I am pleased that farmers and dairy cooperatives have stepped up to donate products to food drives and give-aways. I have helped out in a number of these efforts and I can tell you it is heartbreaking to see the long lines of people waiting for food to feed their children, parents and families.

Governor Cuomo's Nourish-NY program has also been extremely helpful to farmers and consumers alike. Prior to the program's inception, New York Farm Bureau was working with individual urban communities, especially in New York City, to source much needed food products for donation. The effort was inefficient, time consuming and costly, but incredibly important. Nourish-NY was able to streamline the program and pay farmers for the product provided. In this depressed farm economy and the market upheaval from COVID-19, Nourish-NY payments have not only provided food to New York residents in need, it has helped keep farms afloat in a challenging financial environment.

At the federal level, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) created the Farmers to Families Food Box Program as a way for distributors to purchase food items from farmers and distribute the boxes to those in need. In New York, we have seen local food distributors purchasing vegetables, fruits, milk, and meat from local farmers and then the boxes are given out at distribution events. However, the program has not been perfect, as there appear to be pockets of the state that may not have received needed boxes and farmers who may not have been able to connect with distributors. NYFB continues to work with USDA to address concerns to ensure both farmers and those in need can adequately utilize the program.

While NYFB focuses on the production side of the food industry, we also want to recognize the importance of long-established food assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) which not only provides food purchasing assistance to those in need but also assists with purchasing food from New York farmers. The ability of individuals to use their SNAP EBT cards at farmers markets has not only been a needed source of income for farmers who sell their items at markets, it also offers consumers in need the opportunity to purchase local, fresh produce. In addition, programs like “Health Bucks” and “Double Up Food Bucks” further incentivize purchasing purchases at New York farmers markets.

As New York Farm Bureau and others continue to address food insecurity, easy access to sales and purchasing for both farmers and customers is paramount. USDA has significantly expanded their SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot Program which allows individuals to use SNAP EBT cards for online food purchases. Currently in New York, only Amazon, ShopRite, and Walmart are approved vendors. New York Farm Bureau would like to see this vendor list expanded to allow for individual farmers to sell directly, through the online platform, to SNAP recipients. New York Farm Bureau remains engaged with USDA on this topic to ensure other financial options for farmers through online sales. I encourage you as members of the state legislature to continue to reach out with the New York Congressional Delegation as well on needed assistance for these programs.

COVID-19 has highlighted some serious cracks in our food systems. From processing bottlenecks, transportation and distribution issues in getting food to those who need it, and programs we rely on to help people buy food, like SNAP and WIC, as well as the critical role that food banks and others play in distribution. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today, and I, as a farmer, look forward to working with you all to address food insecurity.