



April 2, 2020

Secretary Sonny Perdue
United States Dept. of Agriculture
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Secretary:

It is very sobering to have conversations with (and listen to) growers when they report the status of the watermelon industry while we work on projections for the coming weeks and months. Every grower & shipper from Florida & Georgia to Texas to Arizona & California is facing the same enemy Watermelon sales have disappeared!

We are sure that you have heard loud and clear that the closure of the foodservice³ sector has caused harm to the F&V Industry. We agree with that, however we need to bring your attention to the retail sector. That is where the watermelon industry has and is being harmed like we have never seen before.

Retailers are cutting back and cancelling orders, with one retailer referring to watermelon as a non-essential crop. If a truckload is kicked (rejected), with the foodservice sector and other industry customers shut down, there is no outlet to move that fruit to - - which means a total loss for the grower (plus the cost of trucking and disposal).

Growers that have been harvesting in Florida are leaving fields completely untouched, with a resulting total loss. Those that are harvesting are doing so selectively by picking select sizes that they have orders for. Healthy, beautiful & nutritious watermelons are left unharvested and will assuredly cause a significant attrition and family farm bankruptcies in the watermelon industry as a result.

Consumers being ordered to stay-at-home, many are unemployed and/or out of work, and the massive limitations of income due to the impacts of COVID-19 have caused the purchase of watermelon to become a 'luxury buy'. Consumers have swiftly moved away from that purchase and resorted to a 1950s purchasing habit of staples like potatoes and moved away from items that are not normal. Watermelon is not even appearing on shopping list. With job layoffs, lack of disposable income, and the changing buying habits of consumers, the future for watermelon growers has become bleak and troublesome.

Our growers do not want to think about doomsday, but they are realists. Weather events have beat them up terribly, and now this. Unless there is a quick and drastic turnaround on

190 Fitzgerald Road | Suite 3 | Lakeland, FL 33813
Phone: 863.619.7575 | Fax: 863.619.7577
www.watermelon.ag

the coronavirus and, one of our larger multi-state growers stated recently, “there will NOT BE ONE PROFITABLE GROWER IN FLORIDA!” And, it will transcend northward and westward to the rest of the U.S.A. soon after the May harvest is completed.

To reduce this to the grocery store cash register (results), our association was recently asked by the office of Florida’s Agriculture Commissioner (Nikki Fried) to provide COVID-19 impact projections on the watermelon industry in Florida. Florida is the #1 watermelon producing state in the USA. (Georgia is #2). Here is where it really gets personal, and real:

Percentage of WM Losses to date: 25% of plantings

Projected % loss thru Florida WM season: 60% of plantings

*NOTE: The 60% projection is optimistic (based on a market come-back by May 1.)
If that does not happen, then increase that loss percentage up to 75%!

Projected losses of Florida WM for 2020 spring season: \$96.9 million = \$ Value

* NOTE: projection is based on \$161.5 Million Value in 2019

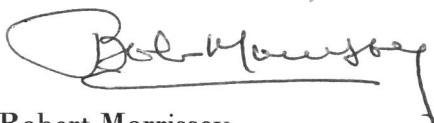
If things do not turn around, the losses will exceed \$121 Million (just in Florida)!

Projected attrition of growers: T.B.D. We need to pray for them!

Mr. Secretary, my conversations with mutual friends like Greg Leger (Cordele, GA) are sobering, truthful, and heart-breaking. They are the salt of the Earth, and they are hurting, albeit not as much (YET) as many of our Florida growers (along with others in southern states like Texas and California). This sales and growing disruption is a major crisis, and it is the result of significant changes in consumer incomes, which has in turn changed consumer buying habits. Watermelon has become a Casualty of this War!

On behalf of our growers and shippers from across America, I have a major ASK of you, if I may. Please keep our guys and gals in mind when you decide how to help growers and the F&V Industries. We unfortunately yet realistically expect to see some attrition and family farm bankruptcies as a result of COVID-19 and its impacts on the business. Of that, we have no doubt. But maybe – just maybe – USDA and Congress in their stimulus package(s) can find a way to help these growers ‘survive’. Internally in our association, I am referring to this period in our lives as ‘*The Real Survivor – The Farm Game*’. It is all about survival, but the game is off the table - -this is for real! We will hope (and pray) that Washington can help our family farms to survive. Thank you, Sir, for your consideration. May the Good Lord Bless you and keep you in his graces.

Sincerely,



Robert Morrissey
Executive Director