

COVID-19 Lockdown Conducive to Unprecedented Crisis in US Agriculture: US Farm Relief Program Hands Billions to Agribusiness While Millions Lack Food

By [Alex Findijs](#)

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The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced plans on Friday, April 17, for a farm relief program. Funded largely through the CARES Act, the \$19 billion package will be used to funnel funds to corporate farms while providing little assistance for the vast majority of small or working farmers.

Like other government programs to help farmers, most of this money will end up in the hands of agribusiness. The majority of farmland is owned by farms grossing over \$500,000 in sales, a figure that demonstrates the demise of the American family farm. In total, \$16 billion will be handed directly to farmers, of which \$9.6 billion goes to the livestock industry. This funding will be given largely as reimbursements for “losses” and will not be contingent upon providing food to those in need.

The remaining \$3 billion will be used to purchase \$100 million each of produce, meat and dairy that will be distributed to food banks, nonprofits and community and faith organizations every month. This is a paltry sum, amounting to just 27 cents a day for every food insecure person, a figure that will only decline as America’s now 22 million unemployed seek assistance.

It will also provide funds to distribute 1,000,000 meals a week to children in “a limited number of rural schools.” How this would actually be done given the wide dispersion of such students, many of whom rode buses for an hour or more to reach their schools, is unclear.

This bailout is intended to offset financial losses from the collapse of distribution systems during the pandemic. While grocery stores are having difficulty keeping their shelves stocked, much of the food in the pipeline is packaged in bulk quantities for institutional buyers such as restaurants and schools.

The closure of restaurants, schools and other institutional buyers has resulted in farmers destroying millions of pounds of food as their distribution chains are disrupted. This is not because there is no demand, but because transitioning to retail packaging is too costly. It is cheaper to destroy food than to repackage it and send it elsewhere.

This mass destruction of crops and dairy products comes at a time when millions of Americans have lost their jobs and are now turning to food banks to feed their families. Some food banks are reporting an increase in demand as high as 300 percent. Lines of [cars](#)

[in the thousands](#) have been reported queuing up at food banks across the country.

But even if all the available food was sent to food banks, they lack the necessary resources and equipment to handle such an expansion in supply. A study of food banks in San Diego County, California, found that in 2015 less than half of food banks had enough refrigerator space and only 54 percent had enough freezer space to service people in need. If food banks around the country did not have enough storage space before the pandemic, there is no reason to believe that they are prepared to handle a huge rise in demand or supply.

Feeding America, one of the largest organizations representing food banks, estimates that an additional \$1.4 billion is needed to cover the increasing operating costs of food banks, an insignificant amount compared to the \$2 trillion granted to bail out the banks and corporations.

Whether or not food banks and charities can handle a massive influx is not an issue for the capitalist class and the state that protects it. They do not care whether people receive enough food, as long as the agricultural industry remains profitable and the pretense of aid is maintained.

There is not even mention in the legislation of providing agricultural and food processing workers with aid. Without proper protective equipment, these workers are at great risk, and migrant workers in particular are threatened with destitution without income support.

Farm laborers earn between \$15,000 and \$24,499 a year, according to official figures, with a quarter living below the poverty line. Already working and living in horrid conditions, these workers face privation during a global health crisis. Suffering similarly horrendous conditions, meat packing workers are kept on the job while the virus is allowed to tear through their plants. It has already taken several lives and infected hundreds of workers. These workers need aid far more than the capitalists who exploit them.

The ruling class has made it clear with this relief program that it only cares about protecting profits at the expense of workers. Kenneth Sullivan, CEO of the meatpacker Smithfield Foods, said, "We have to operate these processing plants even when we have COVID. If we don't, we sadly won't have food."

This is a falsehood. Tens of millions of pounds of food are being destroyed while the USDA estimates that 2.4 billion pounds of meat sits in cold storage—enough to cease all meat packaging for several weeks until protective measures are put in place.

An estimated 3.7 million gallons of milk are dumped every day, enough to provide all 37 million food insecure people with two quarts a week. There is plenty of food to last while measures are taken to protect workers, both citizen and immigrant. The claim that workers must die to keep production flowing is a nefarious lie.

What the working class needs is not a haphazard dumping of goods into food banks and charities, but an adequate income so that all working people can afford to buy food, and an adequate supply so that the food is available to those who want it.

This should be combined with a coordinated effort to reorganize food supply chains to meet social needs. The vast resources of the state and private industry must be placed under the control of the working class, with a coordinated and scientific plan for the safe harvesting

and distribution of agricultural goods.

The retooling of currently unused supply chains is a necessary and far from impossible task. Restaurants, schools and hotels must have their cold storage resources reconverted into temporary distribution centers for those in need. One restaurant in Baltimore, Maryland, called La Cuchara, has already repurposed its supply chain to create a makeshift grocery store. The widespread capacity for converting existing resources is apparent.

But such changes must be made to feed the working class, not to benefit the capitalists who would sacrifice millions of workers to the virus to keep their profits flowing.

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Articles by: [Alex Findijs](#)

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