



**4/10/2020 National Association of Manufacturers Supply Chain
Teleconference with the USDA**

On Friday, April 10, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) hosted a teleconference discussion with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) on their response to COVID-19. Speakers from USDA include Joby Young, Chief of Staff, Blake Rollins, Deputy Chief of Staff, and Kristi Boswell, Senior Advisor to the Secretary. Graham Owens, NAM's Director of Legal and Regulatory Policy, opened and moderated the call.

Joby Young began by thanking those on the call and expressed the USDA's desire to keep lines of communication open between the agency and food supply chain. One way they have done this by making themselves available for industry and stakeholder calls, such as this call with NAM. He also thanked the Administration for their leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding the food supply chain, the main issues Mr. Young said the USDA has been focusing on include:

- 1) **Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce** – The USDA worked with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Transportation (DOT), and the Food and Drug Administrator (FDA) to develop the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security (CISA) guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce. They continue to keep this line of communication open between the agencies and with stakeholders. The purpose of the guidance, Mr. Young said, is to clarify the definition of critical infrastructure and the supporting workforce to help guide state and locality decision-making.
- 2) **Trucking** – The USDA has seen several logistic issues with trucking. This includes truck weight limits on roads or restrictions on hours of delivery. The USDA has worked with the DOT to fix some of these issues and get exemptions in place.
- 3) **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)** – This is the most prevalent ongoing issue for USDA. Mr. Young said that they've seen great compression in the PPE supply line as most of it, rightfully so, has gone to the healthcare sector. However, they recognize there is great need for PPE in the food and agriculture sector as well. The USDA is working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Supply Chain Stabilization Task Force on this issue. Several weeks ago, he said the USDA conducted a survey to identify the most urgent PPE needs in the food and agriculture industry. Their next steps

are working to have clear guidance on how the food supply chain can work into FEMA's PPE analysis and distribution.

- 4) **Employee Absenteeism** – There is a rise in employee absenteeism due to both positive COVID-19 test results and fear of exposure. In addition to focusing on PPE to help mitigate this, the USDA has also been focused on messaging. They are trying to push their message of gratitude and appreciation to those who are working to maintain the food supply chain amidst the pandemic. This messaging has reached the highest levels of the Administration and they are continuing to push this.
- 5) **Small Business Administration (SBA), Payment Protection Program (PPP)** – Mr. Young said that, in how fast the PPP program was stood up by the SBA, it was not made clear that producers are eligible for the program. The USDA has tried to make it clear that producers are eligible though working the with Treasury Department and placing a [PPP FAQ on the USDA website](#).

Blake Rollins said that the USDA has developed strong relationships with stakeholders in their COVID-19 response and this is something they'd like to continue in the future. He began by focusing on USDA's nutrition efforts. Mr. Rollins said the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has done an excellent job of standing up new programs and ensuring maximum flexibilities in existing programs. For example, in California and Arizona, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients are able to make online food purchases. Additionally, they have issued waivers to all 50 states and territories to make it easier to provide school meals. They have also stood up the [Meals-to-You](#) program, a private sector partnership that delivers over 1 million meals per week to rural school children. Lastly, they are working with food banks through the Emergency Food Assistance Program. Mr. Rollins also said the USDA is monitoring farm gate and grocery store food prices, specifically looking for supply and demand disruptions. As demand has shifted from the food service to the food retail industry, the USDA is trying to provide maximum flexibility for the increased flow of food products to grocery stores.

Kristi Boswell spoke to President Trump's order to Secretary Perdue, which the President [tweeted](#) about last night, to make sure farmers are taken care of in this time of crisis. The USDA is working to develop a program that responds to the impact and losses experienced by farmers as markets shift in response to COVID-19. Ms. Boswell said there is still a lot of work to be done on the specifics of the program, but that it will include direct payments to farmers as well as the purchase of commodities for in-kind domestic food assistance. Ms. Boswell reiterated that the food supply chain remains strong and that the USDA is doing everything it can to help producers and manufacturers navigate these uncertain times. She then spoke specifically to the H2A program, saying that the USDA has been working with DHS, the Department of Labor (DOL), and the Department of State to provide flexibilities in the H2A worker program. She said that [flexibilities have already been put into place](#) to ensure the food supply chain can get the workers they need and that more is still to come. Finally, Ms. Boswell spoke to unemployment benefits in the CARES Act. She said the USDA is working with DOL to distribute upcoming guidance on

these benefits. They are also working on messaging in guidance that explains, absent of direct job loss from COVID-19, people are not eligible for these increased unemployment benefits. She encouraged employers to work closely with state partners to ensure there is integrity in the unemployment program.

Question & Answer

How should we get in contact with USDA?

- The USDA has several email portals staffed up to respond to partners and stakeholders:
 - Foodsupplychain@USDA.gov for challenges or hiccups along the food supply chain, as well as PPE issues, and absenteeism.
 - Feedingkids@USDA.gov for questions specific to food security and nutrition program flexibilities, nutrition issues, and partnerships
 - AgLabor@USDA.gov for H2A or other labor issues
- You can also email any of the following USDA contacts:
 - Joby Young, Chief of Staff – joby.young@USDA.gov
 - Blake Rollins, Deputy Chief of Staff – Blake.Rollins@USDA.gov
 - Kristi Boswell, Senior Advisor to the Secretary – Kristi.Boswell@USDA.gov
 - Lillie Brady, Director of External and Intergovernmental Affairs – Lillie.Brady@USDA.gov
 - Ashley Willits, Deputy Director of External and Intergovernmental Affairs – Ashley.Willits@USDA.gov

We are seeing reports that the Administration is exploring COVID-19 tests for food plant workers. Do you have any insight on this?

- Nothing additional at this time. The CDC has guidance for workers in critical infrastructure industries but the guidance does not include testing right now. This is the guidance that USDA is pointing to.

Is the USDA aware of the CO2 shortage due to lost ethanol production?

- Yes, we recently had a call with the Corn Growers Association president on this issue and we are working to find ways to mitigate the issue or outright solutions.

Is there going to be any priority COVID-19 testing for the food and agriculture workforce?

- We are aware that there was a new report that indicated USDA was spearheading an effort on this. However, USDA has not been involved in the specific process or proposal for priority testing. We have raised the issue to the White House Task Force and will continue to communicate this issue with them.