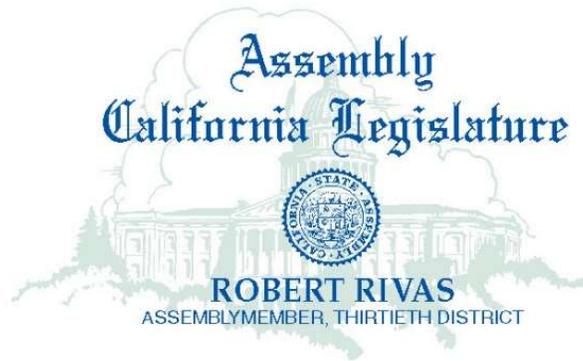


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March 24, 2020

The Honorable Anthony Rendon  
Speaker of the Assembly  
State Capitol, Room 219  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**Re: Agricultural and Farmworker Impacts in the Wake of COVID-19**

Dear Speaker Rendon:

Thank you for your leadership and vision in taking the necessary steps to protect the health and welfare of all Californians amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Swift and decisive action, coordinated between all levels of governments, is critical in this time of uncertainty.

Among the many impacts and disruptions caused by COVID-19 in our State, I fear the impacts on our agricultural sector and farm workers have not been adequately addressed. Considering the growing uncertainty about the overall health of our nation, it is imperative – now more than ever – that there is minimal disruption in the production and movement of perishable and non-perishable foods, beverages, agricultural commodities, meat, and poultry. California’s food system is robust, and our agricultural diversity and productivity provides us with the capacity to best protect ourselves, our families, and our society. Californians rely on family farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers who raise livestock, poultry, and agricultural commodities to feed their families safe, nutritious, and affordable food. It is critical that all food commodities continue to move through the supply chain even when the nation is faced with human illness, travel restrictions, and other outbreak-related impacts.

In the wake of COVID-19, agriculture and farm workers have faced unprecedented and accelerated demand for food products as residents of California and elsewhere have rushed to stock their pantries to ensure they are able to “shelter in place” and weather the pandemic. Meanwhile, our farmers and ranchers face an imminent labor shortage as a result of the U.S. Department of State’s decision to suspend routing non-immigrant visa processing, effective March 18, 2020. Though the Department of State, in response to push back from various industries including agriculture, has since retracted their announced suspension, I remain concerned that delayed or decreased visa processing, including H2A visas for temporary or seasonal agricultural workers, will have a marked impact on California’s food supply as our agricultural workers are unable to meet the accelerating demand they are experiencing.

Additionally, I fear that the further spread of COVID-19 will have a disproportionate impact on the health, safety, and housing of our farm and other agricultural workers. A recent study in my District, which includes the agricultural Salinas Valley and Pajaro Valley, found significant overcrowding in farmworker

households – with an average of 7 PPD (persons per dwelling) as compared to the overall PPD of 3.23 in Monterey County and 2.60 in Santa Cruz County.<sup>1</sup> The study estimated, in this region alone, that 45,560 additional units of farmworker housing are currently needed to alleviate this overcrowding. Overcrowded housing conditions make these essential workers more likely to contract COVID-19 than the general population. Furthermore, farmworkers already suffer from poor nutrition and lack of access to quality health care.

To facilitate California’s current levels of agricultural productivity, ensure that our residents maintain access to fresh, nutritious, and diverse foods, and maintain the health and safety of our agricultural workers, I strongly urge your support for the following priorities:

### **ECONOMIC STIMULUS**

- Ensure that agricultural businesses are included in any state economic stimulus, to ensure they are able to meet the accelerated and increased demand for food products they are experiencing. This might include direct subsidies, overtime or other tax credits, or temporary waivers from some existing regulations.
- Provide a direct subsidy for losses of small businesses responsible for producing, processing, or providing food through direct marketing to compensate for current economic uncertainty.

### **LABOR**

- Now that both the Federal Government and the California State Public Health Officer have recognized food manufacturer employees, farm workers, and related support service workers as “essential critical infrastructure workers,”<sup>2</sup> we must move to ensure that such workers are afforded sufficient benefits and resources to keep them safe, healthy, and adequately compensated – including, *e.g.*, access to sick leave and child care, as well as work conditions that guarantee adequate social distancing.
- In anticipation of the existing labor shortage in this sector being exacerbated by the current health crisis, strong consideration should be given to my bill, AB 2956, the California Agricultural Overtime Premium Tax Credit Act, which will encourage agricultural businesses to increase the available income of farm employees by temporarily relieving these businesses of the financial burden of paying overtime wage premiums.

### **HEALTH AND SAFETY**

- Prioritize available and reliable COVID-19 testing for agricultural workers, given the close proximity in which they are often required to live, work, and travel with other workers, as well as their handling of food products and machinery. This will require the rapid deployment of testing sites and kits to rural areas, where they are not yet sufficiently available.

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<sup>1</sup> See California Institute for Rural Studies, *Farmworker Housing Study and Action Plan for Salinas Valley and Pajaro Valley* (June 2018).

<sup>2</sup> See Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), *Memorandum on Identification of Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers During COVID-19 Response* (Mar. 19, 2020); California State Public Health Officer, *Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers* (Mar. 22, 2020).

- Consideration should be given to my bill, AB 2164, the E-Consult Services and Telehealth Assistance Program, which will provide Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) and Rural Health Clinics (RHCs) – many in agricultural areas – with the tools necessary to implement an E-Consult telehealth program, providing substantially enhanced access to health care providers and specialists for farmworkers and others.

## **HOUSING**

- Similar to what the Governor is attempting to do for the State’s unsheltered population, efforts should be made to secure safe and healthy housing where it is not currently available for agricultural workers. Given the cramped and crowded housing many farmworkers rely on (in most cases, severely overcrowded living conditions), temporary housing accommodations will significantly decrease these workers’ chance of exposure to COVID-19.

I understand that this is a time of great anxiety and it’s essential that we work together to protect our communities. I am confident that with partnership and open communication, we can continue to ensure our residents have access to the freshest, safest, and healthiest supply of California-grown food.

Thank you for attention to these important issues.

Sincerely,



ROBERT RIVAS  
Assemblymember, 30th District

Cc: The Honorable Philip Y. Ting  
Chair, Assembly Budget Committee

The Honorable Susan Talamantes Eggman  
Chair, Assembly Agriculture Committee

The Honorable Karen Ross  
Secretary, California Department of Food and Agriculture