

TEXT OF LETTER TO TOM VILSACK FROM CONGRESSIONAL LAWMAKERS RE:  
DROUGHT ASSISTANCE

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Thank you for your recent disaster designations for droughts for many counties across the Western states. These designations are vital to helping agricultural producers work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to determine disaster impacts and apply for federal relief. We also commend your efforts with the formation of the Interagency Working Group between USDA and the U.S. Department of the Interior to address significant droughts in the West for our farmers, ranchers, tribes, and communities impacted by worsening drought conditions.

In addition to ongoing droughts, low soil moisture, and wildfires, an extreme heat wave hit the Pacific Northwest in June, with temperatures reaching as high as 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Unfortunately, many of the producers who suffered the greatest heat-related losses were either located in counties not covered by the drought designations, experienced losses not covered by drought assistance programs, or both. Due to the severity of the situation, we believe that additional federal assistance will be needed beyond what can be offered through current USDA drought relief programs. Therefore, in an effort to provide financial and other assistance to these producers, we respectfully request USDA explore all potential flexibilities for additional relief within existing programs and identify other options to deliver federal relief to producers in our states so they have the resources to overcome the extreme drought and heat crisis.

Although the extent of damages relating to the extreme heat has yet to be fully determined, agricultural producers expect these impacts to be severe. Reports across the Pacific Northwest and Western states to date indicate berry crops, tree fruits, grain and pulse crops, potatoes, hops, dairy products, forage crops, poultry, beef cattle, and general livestock experienced excessive heat impacts to yield and quality. Specifically, raspberry, blueberry, and blackberry farmers are reporting widespread losses of 20 to 80 percent of their crops due to excessive heat, and such heat also impacted the canes that will produce next year's crop. Cherry growers in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Utah have so far lost an estimated 20 percent of their overall crop due to the extreme heat wave. Early modeling for shellfish suggests an estimated 1 billion sea creatures including clams, oysters, mussels, and geoducks died along the Salish Sea's 4,000 miles of coastline during the heat wave, with reported mortality rates for certain shellfish farmers up to 90 percent. For crops including apples and pears, the full extent of losses may not be known until harvest in the fall, or even later if damage manifests in storage. As producers continue to assess losses over the next 18 months, it is likely that the total impact of the heat wave will be much higher than current estimates.

In addition, we respectfully invite USDA to work with Congress and provide technical assistance as we craft additional authorities and appropriations to address the 2020 and 2021 seasons that include wildfire, drought, and excessive heat-related losses. We thank you for your continued response to these natural disasters and stand ready to work with you on efforts to provide additional relief to agricultural producers facing wildfire, drought, and heat-related losses.

Sincerely,