



May 20, 2020

Bruce Goldstein
bgoldstein@farmworkerjustice.org

**Farmworker Justice Statement on USDA-FDA MOU
to Keep Farms & Packing Houses Running Despite Worker Illness from the
Pandemic**

The USDA and the FDA announced on Tuesday an agreement between the agencies to collaborate to keep farms and food processing companies running during the pandemic. The MOU anticipates the potential for disruptions in the harvests of fruits and vegetables and the processing and packing of foods due to worker illnesses.

“One must read the MOU apart from the press statement accompanying it to fully appreciate the cold-blooded approach the Administration is taking to addressing possible disruption of the food supply due the potential for widespread illness and death of farmworkers and others in the food supply chain,” said Bruce Goldstein, President of Farmworker Justice, an advocacy group in Washington, D.C.

The agreement admits that outbreaks of COVID-19 among workers at food processing facilities “or among harvesting crews” could lead to reduction in food production capacity. No empathy can be read or implied in the MOU.

“Nothing in the MOU indicates any willingness to seek to protect the food system by preventing outbreaks of COVID-19 among farmworkers and other food workers.”

It goes on to say that actions by state and local governments could lead to “the closure of food resource facilities or to commodities not being harvested.”

Goldstein added, "The Administration is claiming the right to prohibit states and local governments from requiring workplace safety precautions that might reduce the food supply while saving the lives of people needed in the food system. No empathy is evidenced for the people who work on farms and in packing houses."

Lip service is given to "guidance" issued by federal OSHA. But there is no occupational safety standard to prevent illness and deaths from COVID-19. This MOU makes clear that the Administration has no intention of issuing one, even if it takes the drastic step of ordering farms, ranches and processing facilities to continue operation.

It's unclear what the Administration intends to do if its failure to require protections for workers leads to widespread illness among workers on farms and in processing facilities. Would they continue to work while being sick? Would they be replaced? If so, by whom? And would the replacement workers have any protections?

Goldstein said, "The Administration has made clear that it is unwilling to protect farmworkers and other agricultural workers who it may force to work during the pandemic. Congress must act to stop the Administration from causing needless painful suffering and deaths among farmworkers and other food workers of this country."

He concluded, "Farmworkers are 'essential workers' but they should not be forced to be sacrificial lambs."

Farmworker Justice, founded in 1981, is a national advocacy organization for farmworkers, empowering them to improve wages, working conditions, occupational safety, immigration policy and access to justice.