May 31, 2018

Dear Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow, Chairman Foxx, and Ranking Member Scott,

The National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA) writes to highlight areas of needed investment and program improvement for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)’s child nutrition and farm to school grant programs.

NASDA represents the Commissioners, Secretaries, and Directors of the state departments of agriculture in all fifty states and four U.S. territories. State departments of agriculture are responsible for a wide range of programs including food safety, combating the spread of disease, and fostering the economic vitality of our rural communities. Four NASDA Members have the authority for child nutrition programs in their state, with numerous state departments of agriculture working cooperatively across agencies to conduct flourishing Farm to School programs.

Increased Funding for the USDA Farm to School Grant Program

NASDA urges Congress to increase funding for the overprescribed USDA Farm to School Grant Program from $5 to $15 million in order to incubate more Farm to School programs throughout the United States. Farm to school is a common sense approach to child nutrition that empowers children and their families to make informed food choices while strengthening the local economy and contributing to vibrant communities.

While communities have already benefited from the USDA Farm to School Grant Program, demand significantly outweighs current available funding. Since 2013, USDA has received more than 1,600 applications requesting over $120 million, and was able to make only 365 awards from $25 million available. Congress needs to build on the success of Farm to School by providing an additional $10 million per year in mandatory funding.
Local Food Procurement

We also recommend providing additional regulatory flexibility to school food procurement practices. Currently, perceived conflicts in guidance to carry out certain provisions of the law have produced confusion and non-compliance in procuring locally produced foods in school systems. In order to provide this clarity, Congress should expand existing local procurement and geographic preference language to specifically allow “local” as a product specification for school food, provided competitive bidding is maintained. The addition of local product specification would provide more flexibility for school districts.

State Authorized Agency

In addition, we request flexibility for the states to determine the appropriate state agency to administer child nutrition programs. Current law requires child nutrition funding be directed to the state educational agency by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture. Because of this requirement, states that have determined a different state agency (such as the state department of agriculture) is best equipped to administer the program must secure waivers from USDA for this to occur. NASDA requests a modification to the statute to allow for funding to be directed to the agency authorized in each state to administer the program. This change will provide states additional flexibility in determining the agency best poised to administer child feeding programs. It will also relieve state departments of agriculture from burdensome and oftentimes unpredictable waiver requirements from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service.

We look forward to working with you to improve healthy food choices and educational efforts for children and economic opportunities for farmers through child feeding programs. If you have any questions, please contact Amanda Culp at amanda@nasda.org or (202) 296-9680.

Sincerely,

Nathan Bowen
Executive Director, Public Policy