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PRESS RELEASE

American Farmers, Ranchers and Food Workers Call for Better Worker Protections at Meatpacking Plants to Stop COVID-19 Outbreaks and Protect Food Supply

Diverse Group Makes Urgent Call on Trump Administration to Take Immediate Safety Steps to Prevent Ongoing Spread of COVID-19

SIoux FALLS, SOUTH DAKOTA – Today, a diverse group of American farmers and ranchers from Dakota Rural Action (DRA), Northern Plains Resource Council, Western Colorado Alliance, and the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC), joined with the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) International Union, to call on meatpacking companies, the Trump Administration, as well as state and local governments, to take immediate and stronger steps to protect frontline meatpacking workers and our food supply from the deadly COVID-19 virus.

The broad coalition which came together to protect workers and the food supply is calling on meatpacking companies to take immediate safety steps to stop the ongoing spread of COVID-19, which include, but are not limited to: (1) increased worker testing at meatpacking plants, (2) priority access to PPE for all meatpacking workers, (3) halting line speed waivers, (4) mandating social distancing inside meatpacking plants, and (5) isolating workers with symptoms or who test positive for COVID-19.

The need to take these immediate safety steps reflects the significant threat still facing America's meatpacking workers. According to the UFCW internal estimates, more than 3,000 meatpacking workers have tested positive for COVID-19 and at least 44 UFCW meatpacking workers have died from the virus. Because of the continuing spread, at least 30 meatpacking plants have closed at some point since March

2020 – with closures impacting over 45,000 workers and contributing to a 40 percent reduction in pork slaughter capacity as well as a 25 percent reduction in beef slaughter capacity.

The following statements are from the leading members of the diverse coalition:

“Too many workers are being sent back into meatpacking plants without adequate protections in place, reigniting more outbreaks in the plants and our communities,” **said Nick Nemec, a farmer, cattle producer and DRA member from Holabird, SD.** “Leadership at all levels has shown a lack of support and concern for the workers and the farmers. A safe food system starts with the safety and respect of those doing the work to produce and process the food. Our current system fails because it treats farmers and workers with little respect and little regard for our safety.”

“The best way to protect our food supply is to protect the people who work within it,” **said UFCW International President Marc Perrone.** “From frontline food processing workers to farmers and ranchers, we are all critical to keeping American families fed during this crisis. Enacting strong worker safety standards inside meatpacking plants will help people outside of them as well and ensure every link in our food supply chain is secure.”

“We support the workers’ call for mandatory worker protections,” **said Kathryn Bedell, rancher and Western Colorado Alliance member from Fruita, CO.** “If they don’t get protective equipment and safe working conditions, the food system will remain vulnerable and we all lose – producer, workers and consumers. For too long, the government agencies have stepped back and allowed global meatpacking companies to voluntarily comply with antitrust laws. We know from firsthand experience that this is a failed approach, because it has allowed the meatpacking cartels to manipulate prices paid to livestock producers to the detriment to our livelihoods, and to the detriment of our rural communities who depend on the cattle business.”

“Safe food starts with safe workers,” **said UFCW Local 304A member John Massalley who works at Smithfield in Sioux Falls.** “When meatpacking plants struggle to contain this virus, it’s not just the workers inside like me who are at risk, family farmers and ranchers are too. Regular testing is critical to stopping future outbreaks, keeping workers safe and protecting our food supply.”

“This pandemic didn’t create the crisis for workers and producers in the meat industry, but it has made a horrific situation even worse,” **said Steve Charter, a Shepherd, MT rancher and Northern Plains Resource Council board member.** “The consequences of this rigged system are now threatening the lives of meatpacking workers at the same time they’re killing the livelihoods of family ranchers. If leaders want to address this crisis, they need to start with enforcing antitrust laws, instead of abusing emergency authority to force workers to endanger their health. We must use this opportunity to create decentralized, local and regional food systems that are better for producers, consumers, and workers. Now, more than ever, we need policies that help folks who wear boots to work each day instead of shining the shoes of executives in board rooms.”

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The UFCW is the largest private sector union in the United States, representing 1.3 million professionals and their families in grocery stores, meatpacking, food processing, retail shops and other industries. Our members help put food on our nation's tables and serve customers in all 50 states, Canada and Puerto Rico. Learn more about the UFCW at www.ufcw.org.

[Dakota Rural Action \(DRA\)](#) organizes people and builds leadership while developing strong allied relationships. We protect environmental resources, advocate for resilient agriculture systems, and empower people to create policy change that strengthens their communities and cultures.

[Northern Plains Resource Councils](#) is a grassroots conservation and family agriculture group that organizes Montanans to protect our water quality, family farms and ranches, and unique quality of life.

[Western Colorado Alliance for Community Action](#) brings people together to build grassroots power through community organizing and leadership development. We believe that right now, today, we have the ability and opportunity to create a future where engaged local voices are leading communities across Western Colorado that are healthy, just and self-reliant.

[The Western Organization of Resource Councils \(WORC\)](#) is a network of eight grassroots organizations in seven Western states with 15,000 members, many of them ranchers and farmers committed to common-sense reform in agriculture, oil and gas development, coal mine reclamation, and rural economic development. Headquartered in Billings, Mont., WORC also has offices in Colorado and Washington, D.C.