

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 7, 2024

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Thank you for appearing before the House Committee on Agriculture on February 14, 2024, to discuss the range of issues impacting all parts of the agriculture value chain. A substantial portion of the conversation revolved around the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA, Department) 2021 update to the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP). As you recall, Section 4002 of the 2018 Farm Bill (P.L.115-334) mandated that "by 2022 and at five-year intervals thereafter, the Secretary shall reevaluate and publish the market baskets of the Thrifty Food Plan based on current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance." The premise of the provision was simple: an exercise in good governance to ensure these market baskets were updated with regularity. Most importantly, this provision was expected to remain cost neutral, an expectation grounded by more than 40 years of precedent, as verified by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO).

It is no secret this exorbitant spending increase—roughly \$256 billion over a ten-year window—added a colossal target on any future farm bill, compromising not only the nutrition title, but the titles that support every farmer, rancher, forester, and rural community.

Since this action—an action devoid of Congressional input or legitimate authorization—there have been a litany of letters, roundtables, hearings, and discussions on the latitude of this Administration, but little debate and analysis on the outcomes of such an enormous increase in spending. Therefore, we respectfully request answers to the below questions no later than March 22, 2024:

1. In recent updates to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), USDA stated it has consulted with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) on whether the TFP should be designated as "highly influential," but did not disclose the outcome of those consultations. What did OMB and USDA discuss? How could one come to the decision that the TFP reevaluation is not a highly influential scientific assessment, given that the bar is a potential impact of \$500 million per year?
2. What is the total annual and projected cost of the Department's 2021 update to the TFP, given that multiple USDA programs are indexed to it?
3. Clearly, CBO estimated that Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits increased by well over \$250 billion following the 2021 TFP reevaluation. Has the Department taken any steps to calculate the impact of this additional investment, namely, the impact on food security and the overall economy (i.e., beyond retailers)? If so, what are those steps? Has your analysis shown any impact as of today? If the Department has not taken steps to calculate the impact, why not?

4. On January 31, 2024, the Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNS) published a Scientific Clearance Policy that lays out detailed peer review policies based on OMB guidelines and GAO's recommendations. That policy outlines steps, such as external and independent peer review, that were not taken for the 2021 reevaluation. Even with the recent Alaska and Hawaii TFP reevaluation, you did not publish the names of the peer reviewers. Why not? Without publishing the names of the peer reviewers, how can outside observers be confident you considered a range of views and incorporated them into the process? How can outside observers trust the Department acted with integrity?
5. The FNS fiscal year 2024 Research and Evaluation Plan identifies several research projects related to the TFP. How many projects are currently underway? How high a priority are these projects, and will you complete them before beginning the 2026 reevaluation? If not, why not?

The Committee on Agriculture is the principal authorizing committee for all matters related to agriculture in the House of Representatives and "shall have general oversight responsibilities" as set forth in House Rule X.

Sincerely,



Brad Finstad
Chair, Nutrition, Foreign Agriculture and
Horticulture Subcommittee



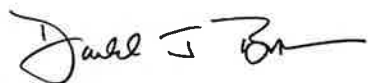
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Chairman, House Committee on Agriculture



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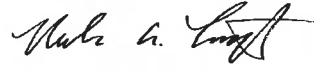
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