

# United States Senate

October 19, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader  
United States Senate  
S-230, The Capitol  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer  
Minority Leader  
United States Senate  
S-221, The Capitol  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Leaders McConnell and Schumer:

We are writing to express serious concern about the drop in user fee collection that the COVID-19 pandemic is causing the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) Agricultural Quarantine Inspection (AQI) program and request that you include supplemental funding to ensure the continuation of this program that is critical to safeguarding America's agriculture and environment in any year end appropriations legislation or COVID-19 relief package.

The AQI program is conducted in collaboration with the Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection (CBP). AQI's budget is normally supported by the collection of user fees for inspection of luggage and cargo. The pandemic has severely curtailed travel, which has significantly decreased user fee collection. It is estimated that the program will soon run out of money and additional funding of over \$600 million will be needed to carry the program through fiscal year (FY) 2021.

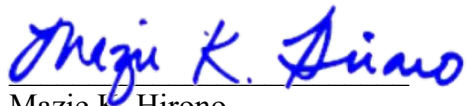
This lack of funding jeopardizes the mission of the program, which is to detect and mitigate any foreign pests found in luggage or cargo at U.S. ports of entry before they establish in our environments and threaten our nation's agriculture and environment. It is estimated that agricultural inspectors at U.S. ports of entry intercept tens of millions of pests each year that threaten our nation. In the U.S., damages caused by invasive species are estimated to cost more than \$100 billion each year.

It also risks furloughing the 4,800 dedicated USDA APHIS and CBP employees that work day in and day out to protect our nation from invasive species. Should these employees, who receive specialized training to conduct these inspections, work elsewhere as a result of a furlough, the federal government will risk being unable to ramp up the program as travel resumes. This could result in a number of downstream impacts, including grounding flights and stopping the export of agricultural products from Hawaii and Puerto Rico to the mainland.

The potential economic consequences of allowing the funding for the program to lapse far exceed the more than \$600 million needed to keep this program on track until travel resumes to pre-pandemic levels.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



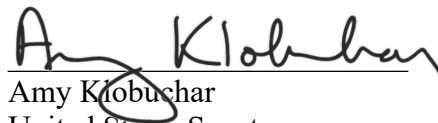
Mazie K. Hirono  
United States Senator



Brian Schatz  
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator



Amy Klobuchar  
United States Senator