

January 11, 2021

COVID-19 Expert Vaccine Allocation Panel (EVAP)
Texas Department of State Health Services
PO Box 149347
Austin, Texas 78714-9347

RE: Returning employees of fresh produce industries to the priority lists for vaccine access

Dear EVAP Members,

The fresh produce industry is committed to prioritizing the safety of our workers, whether harvest crews in the field or employees in packing facilities, all while keeping the food supply chain moving. Produce workers play an essential role in feeding American consumers and the world at a time when our healthy fruits and vegetables are more in need than ever. With every stage of the emerging COVID-19 crisis, our industry never stopped, never slowed down and we never went virtual. Food continued growing and we continued harvesting, packing, and providing that product to families across the globe. Our industry was the earliest adopters and embraced public health advice for social distancing, personal and facility hygiene, face coverings and more.

In Texas, the more than 6,000 farms employ over 30,000 employees annually in the fresh produce sector. Not only are these workers critical to bringing fresh fruits and vegetables to millions of Americans every day, these workers are also many of the same workers that depend on their weekly paycheck to make ends meet. Throughout the industry, we often see a husband and wife working for the same company. In the wake of the pandemic, we have heard reports of families having to choose between the dual-income or a parent leaving the workforce to stay home with children in order to complete virtual schooling. In the event the remaining working parent contracts COVID or even requires quarantine, it potentially puts the entire family in financial jeopardy.

We are requesting that our essential workers, especially the fresh produce industry, be given the next highest priority for receiving the vaccine behind healthcare workers, first responders, and vulnerable populations. Including those in fresh produce, USDA reports that Texas agriculture employs 143,763 farm laborers¹, with a total of 1.96 million people directly employed in the state's agriculture and food-production arena². Prioritizing vaccinations for our workers will not only be important to help keep workers safe and healthy, but it is also crucial for keeping our food supply chain operating with minimal disruptions.

¹ https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1_Chapter_1_State_Level/Texas/st48_1_0077_0077.pdf. January 11, 2021.

² <https://www.fb.org/market-intel/feeding-the-economy-agricultural-jobs-by-state>. January 11, 2021.

Like all Americans, we owe a huge debt of gratitude to the first responders and health care professionals who have been on the front lines and worked tirelessly to treat and provide comfort to those who have contracted the COVID-19 virus.

We understand and take seriously the tremendous responsibility that accompanies feeding the nation and many around the globe. We have seen our front-line food and agriculture employees step up to the challenge of ensuring minimal disruption in the nation's food supply. Front-line food and agriculture employees have been designated as essential critical infrastructure workers under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), and the Center for Disease Control has recommended Agriculture and Food Supply workers as a priority group for this purpose. It ensures planting, harvesting, processing, and distribution of human and animal food can continue to meet the needs of our nation.

Vaccine access is an important step in keeping our employees safe and in keeping American families fed. Again, we humbly request that following our nation's health-care workers, vulnerable populations (i.e. high-risk, underlying conditions, 65yrs and older) and first responders (police, fire and ambulance), **that the EVAP consider placing the fresh produce industry workers in a priority vaccine-recipient group.**

Respectfully,



DANTE L GALEAZZI
Texas International Produce Association
Texas Vegetable Association



DALE MURDEN
Texas Citrus Mutual
Texas Citrus Pest & Disease Corp.



TED PRUKOP
Texas Valley
Citrus Comm.