

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 28, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Republican Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Democratic Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McConnell, Leader McCarthy, and Leader Schumer,

We write to call your attention to a significant funding shortfall facing the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Agriculture Quarantine Inspection (AQI) program, which if left unaddressed could result in the entry of serious animal and plant diseases into our country.

As you may know, the AQI program is funded through user fees collected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) from international travel and cargo shipments. These user fees cover the salaries and expenses of CBP's Agriculture Specialists, Technicians, and Canine Teams. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a steep decrease in both international air and marine travel and cargo imports, which in turn is causing the funds that ordinarily pay for AQI to dry up. The APHIS user fee reserve fund that is meant to maintain a reasonable balance in the event of a temporary reduction in fee collections is also expected to run out soon. All told, APHIS estimates it will require \$630 million to fund AQI inspections for Fiscal Year 2021. Unless Congress acts soon to plug this hole, CBP would be forced to furlough inspectors. Even before COVID-19, AQI was already 700 inspectors short of staffing requirements, so unless Congress acts soon to fill this gap, the situation will get much worse.

Allowing the AQI program to falter could pose significant risk to U.S. agriculture and public health. If foreign agricultural diseases and pests enter the U.S. due to inadequate inspections, the result could devastate crops nation-wide, cost U.S. agricultural producers untold sums, and result in higher food prices for American consumers. For instance, the Asian citrus psyllid and Huanglongbing, also known as citrus greening, was first detected in Florida in 2005, and has since spread to citrus trees throughout Georgia, Florida, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands and in portions of South Carolina, Louisiana, California, and Texas. It is estimated that citrus greening is costing the U.S. over \$1.1 billion annually.

In August 2020, the U.S. Department of Agriculture updated its list of diseases and pests that currently threaten U.S. agriculture. In fact, APHIS developed a list of 59 pests and diseases that could pose a significant risk to U.S. food and agriculture resources. As Members of Congress who represent agricultural producing areas of the country, we believe that it is absolutely critical that we ensure the CBP AQI program is fully funded and functional to keep these pests from entering the U.S. and devastating domestic producers.

Therefore, we urge you to take action to address this issue as quickly as possible. We thank you for your attention to this issue and stand ready to work with you on a solution.

Sincerely,

JULIA BROWNLEY
Member of Congress

PETER WELCH
Member of Congress

RALPH ABRAHAM, M.D.
Member of Congress

CINDY AXNE
Member of Congress

DON BACON
Member of Congress

MIKE BOST
Member of Congress

ANTHONY BRINDISI
Member of Congress

CHERI BUSTOS
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DAVID N. CICILLINE
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BEN CLINE
Member of Congress

JIM COSTA
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TJ COX
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