



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4333

July 16, 2021

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Agriculture Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We congratulate you on your confirmation as the Agriculture Secretary and leadership of the Department of Agriculture in these times of great need to assist our nation in the COVID-19 crisis it faces.

We are concerned during the unprecedented economic circumstances brought on by the national pandemic of COVID-19 about our nation's production of renewable chemicals, biobased plastics and materials, and consumer biobased products which have been certified in the USDA BioPreferred® Program.

As you know, the United States leads the world in producing the highest total volume and yield of commodities that matter most to the thriving biobased economy. Consumers worldwide are increasingly demanding sustainable, plant-based materials for consumer goods beyond food, and the global marketplace is rising to meet that demand.

Global production of renewable chemicals, bioplastics, and biobased materials are expected to grow 13% in the next five years. Yet data indicates that the U.S. is falling behind its competitors. Between 2014 and 2019, North America's share of the global bioplastics market grew just 4% from 14% to 18%, while Europe's share increased by 10% from 15% to 25%. This is despite the U.S.'s position as a global leader in agricultural production.

Growing the U.S. biobased economy is extremely important to the many farmers and producers who will bear the impact of the decrease in consumption, which will further damage an already hurting rural economy and result in the closing of production facilities that employ many people in the rural communities in our home states.

The USDA Federal biobased procurement and sustainability program, the BioPreferred® Program, encourages purchasing "green." While the program has been successful in certifying (labeling) products over the years, federal agencies have not been required to buy BioPreferred® options where available.



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As you know, the BioPreferred® Program contains two components, certification and procurement. The program is thriving in its certification of biobased products, but it continues to fall far short in its procurement of these products.

False promises continue to be made to renewable chemical and biobased product producers when they receive certification, since there is no procurement of their products by the federal government. There is a lack of transparency with all stakeholders in the procurement process and sales data. Moreover, when advocates for the BioPreferred® Program try to tap into the additional discretionary funding approved for the program in the 2018 Farm Bill, they are asked by Congress: “How well is the program doing?” Without sound sales numbers, it is very difficult for program advocates to answer this question and for Congress to continue supporting the growth of the program.

If the program were operating properly, we think it would be very successful. The failings of this program need to be addressed immediately, and more time needs to be spent by USDA and its contractors developing the procurement side of the program, determining what these sales numbers are and operating the program as Congress intended.

Advocates for the BioPreferred® program in 2016 to 2018, succeeded in moving the program to its new home in USDA Rural Business-Cooperative Service (RBCS) and USDA Rural Development (RD), which was enacted in the 2018 Farm Bill. The previous home for the program in USDA had become a program which provided a steady income for others and not the producers. Unfortunately, this move has not resulted in the execution of the program as we had envisioned.

USDA RBCS and RD need to demonstrate purchases of biobased products. Based on the current usage and product availability we propose starting with a test focusing on USDA certified office supplies. Unfortunately, purchases by USDA through distributors such as Office Max, Amazon, Staples, and other distributors are all fossil fuel based. USDA certified office supply purchases of biobased products by USDA would be an important example to demonstrate that the program is starting to function as Congress intended and could be scaled quickly to other product categories.

We would anticipate that, if USDA is not complying with the law, and the program is failing in the agency where it resides, it would be very difficult to promote the BioPreferred® Program to other federal agencies and their contractors.



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To ensure the USDA BioPreferred® Program is operating as Congress intended, we would ask you to provide the following information:

- Provide a report to Congress showing the procurement of biobased products from the BioPreferred catalog, and their sales numbers from the last four years.
- Within 180 days of this letter, provide proof of immediate purchases of everyday biobased products used by USDA and other federal agencies from distributors such as USDA certified office supplies over incumbent products which are fossil fuel based.
- Within 180 days of receiving this letter, please provide documentation that USDA has been contacting these agencies to make them aware of the procurement opportunities for biobased products.

We would also encourage USDA to actively promote biobased products and recommend them to meet federal agency procurement officers and their contractors, with the procurements made recorded and shared with Congress.

We stand ready to work with you on ways to deliver on continued investment and support for the USDA BioPreferred® Program. This fits with President Biden's "Executive Order on Ensuring the Future Is Made in All of America by All of America's Workers," to ensure all federal government agencies should buy from American businesses.

The BioPreferred® Program offers an opportunity to decarbonize the nation's everyday consumer biobased products, drive the nation's biobased economy growth, create jobs, promote sustainable production of consumer biobased products, and create opportunities for climate-smart practices which, in turn, will improve the environment and societal health.

Thank you for considering our request and for your dedication to rural America. We look forward to working with you on deploying additional resources that Congress gave you in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, and in the most recent budget reconciliation bill of \$1.9 trillion enacted in March.

Respectfully,

Marc Veasey
Member of Congress

Kay Granger
Member of Congress