

November 7, 2023

The Honorable Katherine Tai
United States Trade Representative
600 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20508

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Ambassador Tai and Secretary Vilsack,

The undersigned organizations urge the Biden-Harris Administration to undertake a proactive agriculture negotiating agenda at the World Trade Organization (WTO) that is focused on modernizing global agriculture trade policies. As we approach the 13th Ministerial Conference (MC13), the U.S. government should pursue achievable, short-term goals while laying the groundwork for a more ambitious, long-term effort to reform the agricultural trading system. This should include advancing a proposal on market access and beginning talks with a subset of WTO members in areas where consensus outcomes are momentarily impossible. We are also eager to see WTO members engage with the United States in restoring binding dispute settlement that enables trade enforcement.

The Uruguay Round that led to the creation of the WTO in 1995 resulted in immense progress in modernizing global agricultural trading systems, but we have seen compliance with norms erode in recent years as protectionist measures have increased along with food insecurity. Implementing the WTO agreements remains essential work for the U.S. food and agriculture sector, including through the day-to-day work of multiple committees that address issues relevant to agricultural trade.¹

U.S. leadership is needed to reset the WTO's agriculture negotiations. At MC13, we ask that you prioritize improvements in global food security by encouraging further implementation of current WTO commitments, greater transparency, and other achievable outcomes that reduce trade distortions and contribute to predictable, open markets. The United States should also continue to object to concessions on market price support calculations, which would render the disciplines of the WTO Agreement on Agriculture toothless for many large agricultural exporters. State intervention in agricultural markets through market price support is the most trade-distorting form of support, is harmful to global food security, and should be discouraged.

Anticipating the post-MC13 agriculture agenda, we ask that the United States prepare a meaningful proposal on market access. For years, the United States has rightly insisted that market access – including tariff reductions – needs to be part of any comprehensive outcome on agriculture. In contrast, many WTO members have prioritized domestic support, believing this to be more achievable than market access. In our view, that approach is flawed, because pervasive market access barriers can have a greater trade-distorting effect than domestic support measures. The

¹ See, for example, G/TFA/W/95 and JOB/AG/241

United States has made significant contributions to understanding market access issues in Geneva,² but it has not put forward any proposals or recommendations in recent years.

The lack of market access proposals is understandable given the seemingly unbridgeable differences in the negotiating positions of members in the agriculture negotiations, but it may also be a missed opportunity. While future WTO reform may not lock in market access gains equivalent to a free trade agreement with a specific country, the benefits of reducing agricultural trade barriers globally could be significant. Agriculture is one of the most protected sectors in the world, so reducing the potential for trade disruption could improve food security and resilience while creating more opportunities for those struggling to access global markets.

The United States could make a positive contribution by proposing a post-MC13 negotiating agenda that includes a robust market access component. Other WTO members have developed creative proposals around domestic support that are worth exploring if coupled with commensurate market access concessions. While we are not endorsing any specific proposals, we appreciate the creativity and ambition of those members to break the negotiating logjam. We would also like to see similarly creative market access proposals on the table and technical discussions in both categories around the operational effects of specific policy types, including ways to prevent the abuse of policies that inappropriately limit market access.

Importantly, any future market access or domestic support commitments should include both developed and developing countries, with significant developing country agriculture exporters meeting the same level of ambition as developed countries and a graduation process so that formerly developing countries cannot maintain that status indefinitely. We would welcome the opportunity to work with you on some ideas.

In the likely event that there is a continued impasse in the multilateral negotiations, the United States and other members should bring the negotiations into a plurilateral forum. Work in that forum could lead to concrete, binding commitments, including in areas that are outside the scope of the current Agreement on Agriculture. It could also lay the groundwork for eventual multilateral outcomes by applying non-binding standards, guidelines, and recommendations among a subset of WTO members as an interim step on issues where plurilateral bindings would be infeasible.

The WTO is too valuable to U.S. agriculture and global food security to allow its negotiating function to collapse entirely. A reset in the negotiations is badly needed, and MC13 provides a critical opportunity to determine whether a multilateral reset is possible or if those supportive of continuing the reform process should concentrate their energy on a separate approach. Constructive U.S. support for a comprehensive negotiation that includes market access would be a positive step towards that reset.

² See, for example, JOB/AG/141, JOB/AG/147, JOB/AG/164, JOB/AG/167, JOB/AG/169, JOB/AG/192

Sincerely,

Almond Alliance
American Farm Bureau Federation
American Feed Industry Association
American Soybean Association
Animal Health Institute
California Prune Board
CoBank
Corn Refiners Association
CropLife America
Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative
International Dairy Foods Association
Leather and Hide Council of America
Meat Import Council of America
National Association of Wheat Growers
National Cotton Council
National Council of Farmer Cooperatives
National Grain and Feed Association
National Milk Producers Federation
National Oilseed Processors Association
National Pork Producers Council
National Potato Council
North American Meat Institute
Northwest Horticultural Council
U.S. Apple Association
U.S. Dairy Export Council
U.S. Grains Council
U.S. Wheat Associates
USA Poultry & Egg Export Council
USA Rice
Wine Institute