



September 7, 2021

Secretary Miguel Cardona
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave SW
Washington, DC 20202

Re: Recommendation to Help North Carolina's Aspiring Farmers

Dear Secretary Cardona:

I urge you to help small farmers by including them in the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program. North Carolina farmers provide a critical public service to our state, yet the cost of learning to farm has become an impediment to starting a career in agriculture. Adding farming to the PSLF program would ease this burden for many aspiring North Carolina farmers.

More than 1.27 million North Carolinians have a federal student loan. The average borrower owes more than \$35,300. These student borrowers regularly contact my office because they are struggling to repay their student loans and are putting off major life events like getting married, buying a house, or starting a business as a result. This problem is even more acute in public service careers where wages struggle to keep up.

Recognizing this problem, Congress created the PSLF program in 2007 "to encourage individuals to enter and continue in full-time public service employment." 34 C.F.R. § 685.219. The PSLF program forgives the remaining loan balance of a Federal Direct Loan borrower who works for 10 years in a public service job while making loan payments keyed to their income. 20 U.S.C. § 1087e(m). Though I remain concerned about several well-documented administrative problems with PSLF, the program has provided thousands of aspiring firefighters, nurses, and teachers with a path to pursue their passions and help our communities without the specter of crushing student loan debt.

But the benefits of PSLF are not available to everyone who provides vital public services to our communities. Right now, small farmers - the men and women who literally grow the food we eat to live – are not eligible for PSLF. I fear that we are heading toward a farmer shortage. An estimated two-thirds of all U.S. farmer-owned land will transition ownership in the next 20 years. However, we are not creating new farmers fast enough to keep up with the need. Nationally, there are six times as many farmers over the age of 65 as there are farmers under the age of 35.ⁱ One of the major barriers to entry for young farmers is the tension between the rising cost of learning modern farming techniques and the need to raise significant capital to start a farm.

In a survey of young farmers, 81 percent of them had a postsecondary degree.ⁱⁱ North Carolina has many exemplary agriculture programs that train our next generation of farmers. Yet North Carolina’s young farmers face structural economic barriers to entry after they graduate. In a 2015 study by the National Young Farmers Coalition, nearly 30 percent of respondents said they could not start a farm because of their student debt.ⁱⁱⁱ Another 28 percent of respondents were farming but could not grow their business because of student loan debt. Moreover, almost 6 percent of respondents had abandoned farming altogether because of their student debt burden.

Including small farmers^{iv} in PSLF could significantly alleviate this problem. Given the critical public service that North Carolina farmers perform for our state and nation, I recommend that you explore adding farmers to the PSLF program. If you conclude that, as Secretary of Education, you lack the authority to incorporate farmers into PSLF on your own, I ask you to appeal to Congress for the necessary authority. Adding farmers to the PSLF program will give aspiring farmers the help they need to start productive small businesses, invigorate our rural communities, and secure our nation’s long-term food security.

Sincerely,



Josh Stein
Attorney General
North Carolina



Steven W. Troxler
Commissioner of Agriculture
North Carolina

ⁱ Julia Hotz, *Despite Many Challenges, the U.S. Has More Young Farmers Than it Did Five Years Ago*, CIVIL EATS (Apr. 21, 2019) available at <https://civileats.com/2019/04/12/ag-census-despite-many-challenges-the-u-s-has-more-young-farmers-than-it-did-five-years-ago/>

ii *Farming is a Public Service! A Case to Add Farmers to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program*, National Young Farmers Coalition (2015) available at <https://www.youngfarmers.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/StudentLoanReport3.pdf>

iii *Id.*

iv Some legislative proposals have limited loan forgiveness eligibility to borrowers who work at a ranch or farm that takes in gross receipts between \$35,000 and \$1,000,000 per year. *See* Student Loan Forgiveness for Farmers and Ranchers Act, S. 2168, 116th Cong. (2019) (creating a new loan forgiveness program); *see also* Young Farmer Success Act, H.R. 3232, 116th Cong. (2019) (adding farmers to PSLF program).