

Onion Growers Face Economic Hardship

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Picture provided by: Mike Locati, Locati Farms, Walla Walla, WA

Washington State ranks fourth in U.S. production of onions. Washington dry onion production is focused in the fertile Columbia Basin, from the Walla Walla Valley north.

Pacific Northwest onion growers find themselves in somewhat the same shoes the potato growers are wearing, with massive disruption in the food supply chain due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. At present, onions are not available for purchase in the USDA's food aid programs, including the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, The Emergency Food Assistance Program, and the USDA Foods in Schools program. This, indirectly puts the bulb onion industry in a harmful place as this industry represents \$1.8 billion dollars in farmgate value and \$9 billion plus dollars of value in the American marketplace.

Per the National Onion Association: "While much of our industry enjoyed substantial sales on the retail side this spring, that wasn't the case with growers supplying the food service industry. With the COVID-19 pandemic shutting down the food service industry, onion growers have sustained a massive hit. The food service industry represented half of our business; our processors' business as well are down more than 40 percent."

With a letter written to Secretary of Agriculture, Sonny Perdue on May 11, 2020, the NOA explained that growers produce very large onions for the food service industry because they're supplying food in bulk. Smaller onions supply the retail industry and are considered more palatable for consumer needs. This unforeseen shut down of the food service industry has resulted in a surplus of extra-large onions that will not sell on the consumer retail market due to them being big for the consumer's realistic wants and needs, causing onion growers to "dump onions that they have already spent substantial fortunes on getting from field to table".

To read the entire letter requesting aid and addressed to Secretary of Agriculture, Sonny Perdue click here:
<https://www.onions-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Economic-AssistanceLetter.pdf>