

May 2, 2023

The Hon. Charles Schumer
Senate Majority Leader
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 0510

The Hon. Mitch McConnell
Senate Minority Leader
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Hon. Kevin McCarthy
Speaker of the House
2468 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Hon. Hakeem Jeffries
House Minority Leader
2433 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader Schumer, Republican Leader McConnell, Speaker McCarthy, and Democratic Leader Jeffries:

I. Introduction

Recently, the Puerto Rican Cultural Center of Chicago presented to Congress a proposal to reprogram the Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP) so that at least half of the funds can be used to support farmers on the island and promote agricultural self-sufficiency. As is known, Puerto Rico is an island in the Caribbean that depends on around 85% of product imports. This is not only alarming, but also a food security challenge, since bringing food to the Island requires logistics because it does not have contiguous national territory.

In matters of national security, particularly food security, it is important to maintain a visionary approach that can anticipate challenges that may arise in the future. Without a doubt, the issue of mitigation by supporting community agricultural programs is of the utmost importance to US citizens residing on the island. Making early decisions to strengthen local agriculture would result in minimizing future risks and avoiding having to make higher disbursements to try to attend emergencies. In situations such as those

that Puerto Rico has experienced due to its geographical location; it is important to provide resources that increase agricultural self-sufficiency.

II. Proposal

Puerto Rico Food Sovereignty Program's proposal consists of:

1. Assigning funds, and that 50% of the funds be dedicated to the development of community agricultural programs and farms in the territory of Puerto Rico.
2. They must take cultural characteristics into account.
3. Guides and advice should be issued in Spanish so that they can be better understood by the Puerto Rican population and for the allocation to be maximized.
4. The Secretary of Agriculture shall be responsible for the implementation and administration of the programs and activities financed under this section, and shall work directly with mayors, community organizations, and farmers to identify and select eligible programs and farms. At this point it is recommended to add the expertise of the University of Puerto Rico and its Agricultural Experimental Station research program.
5. The Secretary of Agriculture will also work with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to deploy agricultural and linguistic expertise to support the development and implementation of community farms and programs in Puerto Rico.
6. The Secretary of Agriculture and USAID will develop joint guidelines and criteria for the selection of community agricultural programs and eligible farms in Puerto Rico to receive financing and technical assistance under this section. Such guidelines and criteria will take into account the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the Puerto Rican communities, as well as the capacity and sustainability of the programs and farms.
7. The funds allocated under this section shall not be used for any other purpose than the development of community agricultural programs and farms in Puerto Rico.
8. The Secretary of Agriculture shall submit an annual report to Congress on the progress and impact of the programs and activities financed under this section.

If this proposal is approved, Congress would be contributing significantly to an agricultural impact, not only for Puerto Rico but also for the United States. We are convinced that the correct implementation and follow-up of the program could represent a strengthening in agriculture, food security, and consequently, an increase in agricultural jobs in Puerto Rico. Currently, agricultural jobs in Puerto Rico, according to non-seasonally adjusted data, are estimated at 21,000 jobs. When comparing with March

2022, the number of agricultural workers reflected an increase of 12,000 people.¹ However, we are convinced that this number can be increased if funds are provided for the development of community agricultural programs and farms in Puerto Rico.

In addition, the agricultural sector in Puerto Rico can serve as a steppingstone for the country's economic development, if the transition from PAN (NAP) to SNAP is encouraged, because actively seeking employment is required. On the other hand, there have been efforts on the Island in the direction of food sovereignty. By way of example, the Governor of Puerto Rico, Hon. Pedro Pierluisi issued executive order 2022-029 to respond to the public policy of equal treatment in federal funds.² Additionally, USDA published a final report on the Puerto Rico SNAP Implementation Feasibility Study Update in July 2022.³ As mentioned by the Center for a New Economy, referring to the Feasibility Study, the implementation can have various effects. In our opinion, the most significant, and that can serve as gear with this program, would be the work requirement.⁴ With this agricultural promotion program, job centers would be created for thousands of people, not only as farmers, but also promoting agricultural businesses, research, among other variants.

¹<https://www.mercadolaboral.pr.gov/lmi/pdf/Default/Grupo%20Trabajador/EMPLEO%20Y%20DESEMPLEO%20EN%20PUERTO%20RICO.pdf>

²<https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/comunicados/pierluisi-crea-grupo-multisectorial-para-impulsar-transicion-del-pan-al-snap-a-nivel-federal>

³<https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/PRSNAP-Feasibility-Report.pdf>

⁴ PAN does not impose any work requirements. However, SNAP has a general work requirement, as well as a specific work requirement for Physically Capable Adults without Dependents. In general, “all SNAP participants ages 16-59 who do not meet federal exemption criteria are required to register for work, participate in the job assistance program, or participate in the SNAP E&T program if required by the state agency, accept a job offer in good faith, and not voluntarily resign or reduce work hours below 30 hours per week.” In addition, “ABAWDs must work or participate in a work program for 80 hours per month, unless they receive discretionary exemptions or live in an area where the time limit does not apply. ABAWDs who do not meet the ABAWD work requirement face a time limit to receive benefits of 3 months in a 36-month period” (Feasibility Study, p. 31). **The government of Puerto Rico would have to enforce these work requirements under SNAP. In most cases, failure to meet the work requirements results in loss of SNAP eligibility.** Although a full explanation of the job requirements is beyond the scope of this publication, we note that (1) their application in the US has been controversial; (2) its impact on labor force participation has been little or negligible in many states; and (3) its implementation would require a significant investment by the government of Puerto Rico in information technology, data management, and additional human resources to adequately apply and enforce these requirements. <https://grupocne.org/2022/08/10/pan-vs-snap-un-analisis-de-los-programas-federales-de-asistencia-nutricional-para-residentes-de-puerto-rico/>

III. University of Puerto Rico Agricultural Experimental Station (AES)

On August 10, 1910, the Puerto Rico Sugar Producers Association established the Agricultural Experimental Station (AES) in Puerto Rico as a private entity. Its objective was to carry out research work with sugar cane to solve the problems related to its cultivation.⁵ In 1933 the administration of the Agricultural Experimental Station was transferred to the University of Puerto Rico.⁶ Since 1966, the Mayaguez Campus of the University of Puerto Rico is the land-grant institution for Puerto Rico, and its College of Agricultural Sciences integrates teaching, research, and outreach. Currently, the research farms of the Agricultural Experiment Station are located in different towns of the island, namely: Río Piedras, Gurabo, Juana Díaz, Lajas, Adjuntas, Mayagüez, Isabela, and Corozal, each one on a different ecosystem.



The AES Research Farms (Substations) are located in different strategic points of the island, and total about 3,000 acres of land which allows the development of farms in different parts of the country, as well as the development of seeds and research. As a part of the University of Puerto Rico, the AES can serve as a link for the development of guidelines and technical support for the program. As well as, with the proven experience, we could implement the *Puerto Rico Food Sovereignty Program*.

IV. Support for the Puerto Rico Food Sovereignty Program (Farm Bill)

Having expanded on the AES, and its faculties, we support the *Food Sovereignty Program*. We have had a commitment for years to the development of new technologies and the development of agricultural farms for the food security of our island. However, due to

⁵ Memorial p . 3

⁶ Memorial p . 4

limited resources we have not been able to contribute more. We are convinced that this initiative would provide funds for food security, and if properly managed could allow for long-term continuity. With this purpose in mind, the Government of Puerto Rico should be required to establish a trust so that each newly created farm can have security, and in this way the money is prolonged on the island, thus having integration with other industries on the island.

The Puerto Rican Food Sovereignty Program would not only have a positive impact on the island's agriculture, but would also create jobs, develop the economy, establish a scholarship program for university students, strengthen research efforts, and seek food safety. On the other hand, as previously mentioned, the AES is part of the University of Puerto Rico, which would mean that by becoming an indispensable part of this program, they would be contributing to the strengthening of the primary educational center on the island.

At the AES we are available to provide any technical assistance and contribute our years of experience to this project. The College of Agricultural Sciences and its components the Agricultural Experiment Station, the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and the Agricultural Extension Service, with a history of 113 years, has the infrastructure to allocate funds for the development of sustainable agriculture on the island. Between the 7 substations we have approximately 3,000 acres.

We can develop and promote sustainable projects for agriculture. A few examples of possible projects are the following:

- 1) Dairy industry in PR - New Laboratory of dairy cow genomes. We could produce the replacement heifers to supply a significant part of the local demand. We need labor which could be referred from the SNAP program. This would represent hundreds of jobs that could very well be referred from the SNAP program.
- 2) Meat industry - We have one of the purest Senepol herds in the world. We can export genetic material and generate hundreds of direct jobs referred from the SNAP program at our farm Finca la Montaña in Isabela.
- 3) Poultry and egg industry - At our farm in Lajas we have poultry and dairy farms, and pig and rabbit areas. We would help citizens promote new projects in all these areas by increasing farm animals and birds. For that we need labor (referrals from the SNAP program) and funds that the Farm Bill could supply.
- 4) Fruit Industry- We have representation of fruit trees adapted to our climate. In the propagation of these trees through grafting, we have the ability to promote new crops in PR and aid many farmers by providing them with the material they need for their crops. This includes most of the varieties of tropical and exotic fruits previously evaluated by our institution. For that we need labor that could be referred by the SNAP program and in turn all the farmers that we promote would also need that referred labor.

- 5) Coffee Industry- The Experimental Station has always been the supplier of planting material for our coffee industry. Due to the neglect of the government, natural disasters, and lack of resources, this industry has declined significantly. We can renew and boost it with coffee for export and added value. For this we need labor and funds referred by Farm Bill and SNAP.
- 6) Farinaceous industry - We are sustainable in the production of *plátanos* (plantains) and *guineos* (bananas) but there is a much more extensive range of these crops, and they are emerging niches. *Apio* (arracacha or celeriac) grows the mountains, where there are already more than 100 farmers producing it. *Malanga* (taro) *batatas* (sweet potato), among others, are also important staple food crops.
- 7) Ornamental industry - projects are focused on developing our rural areas with new initiatives and technology.
- 8) UPR Mayaguez Campus has the Magueyes Islet in La Parguera, where we can boost the production of seeds of different edible fish and sow them in our coastal areas. With the funds and the staff, the Sea Grant program can do it. Labor referred by the SNAP program and Farm Bill funds.

The College of Agricultural Sciences has the Agricultural Extension Service (AExtS), represented in all municipalities. It is our arm in the dissemination of information for farmers and citizens. Both, the AES and AExtS have publications, printing facilities, and web pages for the development of information pertinent to the programs and aids that we could be offering in Puerto Rican Spanish.

We also have a food science and technology program (CITA) that can promote added value projects to our crops.

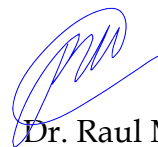
If this project considers us to establish the foundation of food security in our island, we will be the spearhead of all the future economic development of the island. For 113 years we have been present and resilient. A grant of funds like this and with the correct vision of reaching people directly in entrepreneurial projects, thousands of people will make the transition from the PAN (NAP) - SNAP government livelihood programs to the agricultural companies that we will be promoting.

Promoting this initiative would be a great legacy for your legislative work.

Puerto Rico counts on your support, and legislative efforts.



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