

COMMITTEES:

ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS

FOREIGN RELATIONS

RANKING MEMBER:

SUBCOMMITTEE ON EAST ASIA, THE PACIFIC,
AND INTERNATIONAL CYBERSECURITY POLICY

COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION

RANKING MEMBER:

SUBCOMMITTEE ON SECURITY

SMALL BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

CHAIRMAN:

U.S. SENATE CLIMATE CHANGE TASK FORCE

United States Senate

September 25, 2019

SUITE SD-255
DIRKSEN BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2107
202-224-2742

975 JFK FEDERAL BUILDING
15 NEW SUDBURY STREET
BOSTON, MA 02203
617-565-8519

222 MILLIKEN BOULEVARD, SUITE 312
FALL RIVER, MA 02721
508-677-0523

1550 MAIN STREET, 4TH FLOOR
SPRINGFIELD, MA 01103
413-785-4610

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 25000

Dear Mr. President,

We seek an explanation why, knowing that crop shortages and food insecurity were fueling Central American migration, your administration cut foreign food-related aid to the region — all the while decrying the increased flow of migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to the United States.

According to an NBC News report, in September 2018, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) determined that crop shortages, especially in Guatemala's western highlands, were a key driver of record-setting migration to the United States.¹ CBP reportedly found a clear correlation between high migration rates and areas suffering food insecurity. Yet, just one month later, in October 2018, your administration inexplicably announced its intention to cut foreign aid aimed at building food security. This included funds used to mitigate the effects of climate change on small farms.²

In doing so, the White House seemingly ignored CBP's findings, which then-CBP Commissioner Kevin McAleenan amplified publicly when he stated: "Food insecurity, not violence, seems to be a key push factor informing the decision to travel from Guatemala, where we have seen the largest growth in migration flow this year."³ Cutting food aid in the face of food insecurity also defies common sense. It should come as no surprise that the humanitarian organization Mercy Corps found that improved access to agricultural technology and finance in Guatemala significantly blunted residents' motivation to migrate and encouraged them to "stay and fight to have a better future."⁴

¹ Jacob Soboroff and Julia Ainsley, *Trump admin ignored its own evidence of climate change's impact on migration from Central America*, NBC News (Sept. 20, 2019), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/amp/ncna1056381>.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ Mercy Corps, *Subsist or Persist? Assessing Drivers of Migration and Effects of Foreign Assistance Programs on Migration from the Northern Triangle* (Apr. 2019), https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Subsist_or_Persist_Full_Report.pdf.

I am also in possession of a document showing that State Department personnel raised alarm earlier this year regarding your administration's sudden cuts to food security programs in Honduras. Concerned personnel warned explicitly that reduced assistance would likely increase migration rates while leaving tens of thousands of Hondurans more vulnerable to environmental disruptions. The document cites findings suggesting that affected assistance programs have reduced people's intention to migrate as well as actual rates of irregular migration.

Humanitarian organizations such as Catholic Relief Services, CARE International, Project Concern International, and Cristosal now report that your aid cuts are forcing them to curtail or terminate relief programs. In Guatemala alone, these include programs supporting discount agricultural supply markets; rural health clinics; community savings and loan funds; conservation of ecologically sensitive landscapes; and re-integration services for returned migrants.⁵

Your decision to cut foreign aid that helps mitigate migration is difficult to understand, especially given your administration's anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies. Any good-faith effort to respond to the immigration crisis south of our border must address its root causes. And that includes the impacts of climate change, which experts consider to be a contributing factor to the region's crop failures and food insecurity,⁶ and which your administration has denied and ignored.

A strategic focus on global climate resilience would likely have anticipated the impacts of climate change in Central America, giving the United States a head start on addressing the environmental hardship that is driving displacement. Indeed, a strategic approach is sorely needed as climate change aggravates the frequency and severity of hazards, amplifying, among other consequences, the displacement of people within and across borders.⁷ The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre predicts that the end-of-year figure for disaster displacement will be among the highest ever recorded.⁸

Given that the impacts of climate change will vary by region as they increase in severity, we urge a coordinated effort to assess vulnerabilities and enhance resilience in partnership with foreign countries. Unfortunately, we have seen nothing remotely resembling this kind of effort from your administration. In light of these concerns, we request written responses to the following questions by October 16, 2019:

⁵ Tim McDonnell, *Trump Froze Aid To Guatemala. Now Programs Are Shutting Down*, NPR (Sept. 17, 2019), <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2019/09/17/761266169/trump-froze-aid-to-guatemala-now-programs-are-shutting-down>.

⁶ World Food Programme, *Food Security and Emigration, Why people flee and the impact on family members left behind in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras* (Aug. 2017), https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000022124/download/?_ga=2.186416544.849116656.1503506467-813076901.1503506467; see also Jonathan Blitzer, *How Climate Change Is Fueling the U.S. Border Crisis*, The New Yorker (Apr. 3, 2019), <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/how-climate-change-is-fuelling-the-us-border-crisis>.

⁷ International Panel on Climate Change and Land, *Climate Change and Land* (Aug. 7, 2019), https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2019/08/Edited-SPM_Approved_Microsite_FINAL.pdf.

⁸ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Mid-Year Figures, Internal Displacement from January to June 2019* (Sept. 12, 2019), http://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2019-mid-year-figures_for%20website%20upload.pdf.

- 1) Do you agree with assessments from CBP and State Department personnel that crop failures and food insecurity have contributed to increased migration from Central America to the United States?
 - a. If so, then why did you chose to cut agricultural and food security assistance programs in Central America?
 - b. If not, why do you disagree with your administration's assessments?
- 2) Given your administration's own analysis linking food insecurity to increased migration, was it ever suggested to you that the U.S. should expand agricultural and food security assistance programs in Central America? If so, why did you instead cut this foreign assistance?
- 3) Given your vocalized desire to limit migration into the United States, what strategy do you have to address climate change-related displacement (a) in Central America and (b) around the world?

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator