United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 11, 2014

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Michael Froman
United States Trade Representative
Office of the United States Trade Representative
600 17th Street, N. W.
Washington, DC 20508

Dear Secretary Vilsack and U.S. Trade Representative Froman:

We commend your past work to fight the growing geographical indication (GI) restrictions promoted by the European Union (EU). This trade barrier is of great concern to dairy and other food manufacturers in our states. On their behalf, we urge you to continue to push back against the EU's efforts to restrict our cheese exports, particularly to nations with which we already have free trade agreements. In addition, we urge you to make clear to your EU counterparts that the U.S. will reject any proposal in the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations now underway that would restrict in any way the ability of US producers to use common cheese names.

In country after country, the EU has been using its free trade agreements (FTAs) to persuade its trading partners to impose barriers to U.S. exports under the guise of protection for its geographical indications. This trade-damaging practice is concerning anywhere, but it is most deeply troubling where the U.S. has an established FTA or has been actively in the process of negotiating a new agreement. For example, Canada agreed as part of its recently concluded FTA with the EU to impose new restrictions on the use of "feta" and other common cheese names. Common names for products such as "feta" are clearly generic in Canada, as they are in many other countries. These restrictions not only threaten harm to the companies currently involved in the Canadian market, but they would also impair market access for U.S. dairy products that we are now attempting to secure under ongoing trade negotiations. Similar trade barriers are cropping up throughout Latin America as well and are under discussion in many Asian countries involved in negotiations with the EU.

Reportedly, the EU now seeks to more directly impair U.S. competition by imposing restrictions on the use of common food names through TTIP. In the states that we represent, many small or medium-sized family owned farms and firms could have their business unfairly restricted by the EU's push to use geographical indications as a barrier to dairy trade and competition. As we begin to engage in TTIP negotiations that are ultimately intended to bring about a better economic climate on both sides of the Atlantic by lowering barriers to trade, we strongly oppose the EU's gratuitous use of GIs as a protectionist measure.

We ask that USTR and USDA continue to work aggressively to ensure the EU's GI efforts on commonly used cheese names do not impair U.S. businesses' ability to compete domestically or internationally and that you make this a top priority through both official TTIP and bilateral negotiations.

Sincerely,

Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator

Pat Toomey
United States Senator

John Boozman

Elizabeth Warren

Jeffrey A. Merkley

Maria Cantwell

Al Franken

Chris Murphy

Amy Klobuchar

Dianne Feinstein

Pat Roberts

Barbara Boxer

Jim Johnson

Chuck Grassley

Tom Udall

Phillip Gutierrez

Kelly A. Ayotte

Patty Murray

Roy Blunt

Edward J. Markey

Bob Corker, Jr.

Deb Fischer

Mark R Warner

Patrick Leahy

Kirsten Gillibrand

Robert Menendez

Mark Begich

Pat Roberts

Jerry Moran

Rob Portman

Mike Johanns

Dan Coats

Sherrod Brown

Ron Johnson