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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510 - 3505

April 1, 2020

The Honorable Robert E. Lighthizer
Ambassador
Office of the United States Trade Representative
600 17th St NW
Washington, D.C. 2006

Dear Ambassador Lighthizer:

I write to express concern with the news reports that the Administration is considering the deferral of duties on products subject to Most Favored Nation (MFN) tariff rates. I applaud your recent decision to temporarily reduce tariffs on medical devices and equipment and other necessary supplies, but blanket deferral of duties on products unrelated to the coronavirus effort will have unintended consequences. Deferring duties on finished apparel and textile products, in particular, will undermine American manufacturers' efforts to produce the personal protective equipment (PPE) and medical supplies our frontline workers desperately need. I urge the Administration to abandon its consideration of this idea and instead take the steps necessary to support American manufacturers who are stepping up in this time of crisis.

As you know, MFN tariffs have been in place for decades, and they are critical to protecting U.S. manufacturers from a flood of imports, most of which are produced in countries with exceptionally low wages, poor working conditions, and minimal environmental and safety standards. Even with these tariffs in place, American manufacturers have struggled to compete on a level playing field and U.S. workers have lost their jobs as a result.

Consideration of duty deferral is especially poorly timed for the U.S. textile supply chain and its 585,000 workers. Over the last 40 years, cheap imports have destabilized the entire industry and forced factories to close. Despite these ongoing challenges, American and textile manufacturers are working hard to retool and ramp up to produce the PPE and medical supplies our country needs to fight the coronavirus. Deferring MFN rates, even temporarily, will invite a surge of imports and further threaten this vulnerable industry. More immediately, enacting a duty deferral will inhibit these companies' efforts to produce the PPE and medical supplies necessary to protect the lives of our frontline workers and prevent the spread of the pandemic.

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Producing and procuring PPE and medical supplies must be a top priority across the entire federal government, and I support your efforts to lower tariffs on medical devices and equipment and other necessary supplies. But I urge you not to reduce any tariffs on unrelated items that would inhibit efforts to establish a PPE and medical supply chain in the U.S. Now is not the time to undermine American manufacturers and their workers, particularly those who are stepping up to help during the public health emergency.

Thank you for your consideration of this letter. I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,

Sherrod Brown

Sherrod Brown
United States Senator