



# FoodHub in the News

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By Leslie Cole

## **USDA official tackles the challenges facing agriculture**

Kathleen Merrigan, deputy secretary at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, came to town recently to talk up "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food," a new initiative that aims to create economic opportunities by better connecting consumers with local food producers.

FOODday caught up with Merrigan to learn more about the initiative.

On a recent trip to Oregon, you spoke at two universities -- Portland State and Oregon State. Why a college tour? Are you trying to appeal to a younger demographic?

Absolutely, for a few very solid reasons. Here at USDA, in the course of this administration, 50 percent of our employees will become eligible for retirement. Fewer people are retiring, because of pocketbook issues ... but nevertheless there will be jobs in the federal government, and I wanted to attract the best and the brightest to USDA.

The second thing, and completely related to that, is the average age of farmers is 57, and we have about 30 percent of farmers who are age 65 and above. I'm also saying to students there's a world out there in farming and ranching, and all the different agribusinesses that are out there between the farm and the fork where they might find a future.

A third reason for the college tour is that people's understanding of production agriculture, and where their food comes from, is so limited and in some ways very confused.

Is there more to USDA's initiative than just "buy local, buy fresh"? We already do that in the Northwest.

You're right; it's sort of in your DNA. But there are a lot of challenges to re-creating those local and regional food site maps. There's this knowledge gap. Our economic research service does a lot of research on local, about what people are looking for when they buy local. We know that farmers are keeping more of the food dollar, but we're still trying to break that down.

Also, if you look at specific sectors, for example, livestock, there are challenges. (As a small regional producer,) you may have to travel great distances for a slaughter facility, and you may have to wait months beyond when your animals are ready for slaughter to get your

date with fate, so to speak. We've tried to look at building up capacity for small and midsize slaughter operations. We're trying to facilitate the development of mobile slaughter, by clarifying the food safety rules.

A third challenge is about scaling up. How do you aggregate and distribute food from the smaller growers? How do you distribute up and down the supply chain? It really is about developing a distribution network and connecting people (through a food hub). In Oregon, one effort (the Ecotrust Food Hub) is described as a match.com for people who are interested in selling pallets, not pints. A food hub in Virginia that I'm excited about does some processing of product, too, to get it to something that would appeal to an institutional buyer. Sysco is one of their customers. Sysco is big, and yet they're 50 smaller farmers, any one of those individually or even a handful of them wouldn't be of interest to Sysco. Sysco's got this pressure for locally grown, they want to do it, and a food hub allows them to pull it off.

You talk about wanting more young people to consider agriculture. Is there reason for optimism about the economic future of small farmers?

Truth be told, there are a number of small-scale producers that are doing really quite well. It's really about being smart, capturing some of the market premiums out there. The people who are really suffering, and the people who I'm hoping this initiative helps, are the midsize farmers, the ones with gross sales over \$10,000 but less than \$500,000, what some people in agriculture have described as the disappearing middle. They've had a hard time making ends meet, particularly in dairy.

I'm hoping these initiatives will create more market opportunities for these farmers.

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[http://www.oregonlive.com/foodday/index.ssf/2011/03/usda\\_official\\_tackles\\_the\\_chal.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/foodday/index.ssf/2011/03/usda_official_tackles_the_chal.html)