



FoodHub in the News

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By Associated Press

USDA launches pilot program aimed at getting more food from local farms into school cafeterias

MINNEAPOLIS — The popularity of farm-to-school programs that put locally grown food on cafeteria trays has exploded in recent years — so much so that the federal agency in charge of school lunches is giving them a new stamp of approval.

Deputy Agriculture Secretary Kathleen Merrigan said the programs have become so popular so fast that her agency doesn't have solid figures on how many schools are serving their students vegetables, fruits and meat grown by local farmers.

"We know it's just snowballing," Merrigan said in an interview with The Associated Press before her appearance Tuesday at the School Nutrition Association convention in Nashville, Tenn.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture used the convention to release a new report on what works in farm-to-school programs, what doesn't and what the agency can do to help them work better. The report was put together by a USDA team that traveled to 15 school districts across the country and comes as officials, including first lady Michelle Obama, are promoting the importance of healthier food for kids.

"First, it is about bringing fresh locally grown food into school cafeterias," Merrigan said. "So there's the yummy factor, the good nutrition factor. ... Number two, we believe it provides good market opportunities for local producers, particular those midsize farmers that are struggling to make a go of it. This is a real opportunity for them to increase the bottom line in their farming operations. So it's about rural economic development."

Third, she said, farm-to-school programs help connect people with where their food comes from, how it's produced and by whom.

"We know that children are very disconnected from agriculture ... literally thinking food comes from a grocery store," Merrigan said. But many schools use farm-to-school programs to work agriculture into the curriculum, she said, transforming the lunchroom into a classroom.

Farmers who supply schools say they benefit from having steady customers, and they also get satisfaction from knowing they're helping children eat healthier food. Jeff Rosenblad,

owner of Happy Harvest Farms in Mt. Angel, Ore., said he gets great feedback from the districts he supplies with a wide variety of fruits and vegetables.

“The kids like it so much they’re eating (from) salad bars more. They’re eating watermelon, they’re just gorging themselves,” Rosenblad said.

Matt Jones, who owns Jones Farm Produce in nearby Gervais, Ore., said the extra business he gets from supplying schools lets him keep a few more workers employed for a few more weeks a year. He’s been able to sell to schools later into the winter because he has plenty of cold-storage capacity for the apples he grows. A lack of refrigerator space is a common problem for many schools.

“These school districts are not just serving the fresh fruits and vegetables but they’re also educating kids in the process,” Jones said. “They’re trying fruits and vegetables they never would have tried at home, so that’s really good for the children.”

Farm-to-school sales benefit rural economies, said Deborah Kane, vice president of food and farms for Ecotrust, a Portland, Ore., conservation and economic development group that organized a pilot program that gave the Portland and Gervais school districts an extra 7 cents per meal in 2008-09 to spend on local foods. An Ecotrust study coming out soon found even such a small sum could have a big impact — every dollar the two districts spent on local food generated \$1.86 in economic activity, Kane said. And, for each job directly created by their purchase of local food, another 1.43 jobs were created indirectly.

Kane was invited to the White House last week to brief President Barack Obama on another Ecotrust initiative, a USDA-backed online service called FoodHub that helps connect family farms with schools and other urban buyers. The site covers parts of the Pacific Northwest now and aims to go national next year.

The USDA’s 76-page report said team members learned in their travels that communities with farm-to-school initiatives are passionate about them and work hard to overcome the challenges they face, but success depends on good communications among schools, farmers and others invested in the programs. And it said money is needed to support these programs, particularly for food service staff training, equipment and facilities to process and store local produce, and to develop educational activities for students.

In an age when many districts do little more than heat up prepackaged foods, the report noted that schools often lack people trained to clean, cut and cook fresh fruit and vegetables. They may not even have enough knives and other basic equipment to do the job.

The USDA pledged in the report to step up efforts to connect schools with farmers, including increasing collaboration with nonprofits and expanding outreach and awareness initiatives.

Merrigan also announced a pilot program that will give Michigan and Florida schools more flexibility to use federal school lunch money to buy locally grown produce for their students, removing one obstacle. It’s difficult under current rules for schools to direct their federal food

money to local farmers, she said. The goal of the project is to work out the kinks in procurement systems and rules so the program can be expanded nationwide.

While various farm-to-school programs are operating in every state, Merrigan said, the USDA has relied on advocacy groups for data and their numbers are often limited or old. So she asked officials at the convention to participate in a USDA survey to determine what schools across the nation are doing.

“This thing is growing beyond our ability to track it, and we really need a systemized way to get this data,” she said.

The National Farm to School Network estimates there are over 2,500 programs involving more than 10,000 schools around country, up from about 400 programs in 22 states in 2004, but spokeswoman Chelsea Simpson said those numbers aren’t certain. The network is hoping the USDA survey gives everyone a better picture of how many students are benefiting, she said.

“It’s a tricky thing to figure out because the beautiful thing about farm-to-school is it’s such a grassroots initiative,” Simpson said.

URL: http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/usda-launches-pilot-program-aimed-at-getting-more-food-from-local-farms-into-school-cafeterias/2011/07/13/gIQAEAOxBI_story.html