

October Marks the First National Farm to School Month

Written by Elisha Smith
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Farmers, chefs to visit classrooms across the country

Lyons, NE - The first ever National Farm to School Month is taking place this October.

In 2010, Congress designated October as National Farm to School Month, which demonstrates the growing importance and role of Farm to School programs as a means to improve child nutrition, support local farming and ranching economies, spur job growth and educate children about agriculture and the origins of their food.

"Farm to School programs are a win-win. They provide our kids with fresh, healthy food that actually tastes like food and benefits our farmers and communities as well," said Kathie Starkweather with the Center for Rural Affairs, a member of the National Farm to School Network and a partner organization of the 2011 National Farm to School Month. "These programs are widely recognized as an effective way to encourage healthy eating and boost local agriculture sales by bringing local vegetables, fruit, and other products into schools."

According to Starkweather, a focus on farm-to-school local food programs is overdue. Two-thirds of school children eat a National School Lunch Program lunch and consume about one-third of their total calories from that meal. Unfortunately that food travels between 2500 and 4000 miles before reaching their plates.

To celebrate the first National Farm to School Month, schools across the country will be inviting farmers and chefs to visit their school during the month of October. Food service professionals, teachers, parents, farmers and ranchers can visit farmtoschoolmonth.org for assistance organizing an event.

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Over the past decade, the Farm to School movement has exploded across the United States. There are now more than 2,300 Farm to School programs in schools across all 50 states, according to the National Farm to School Network.

For example Joyce Rice, who served as Food Service Director for a small central Nebraska community, was dissatisfied with the food the students were eating and made it her personal mission to get locally grown fresh food into the schools. Joyce wanted to feed students at the elementary, middle and preschool (500 students) delicious, healthy and fresh food. Rice started the Farm to School program by identifying local farmers who could supply food for school lunches. She has also gotten them involved in giving presentations at school. This teaches the children more about how food is grown, where it comes from, and the importance of supporting local growers.

“One local grower who raises asparagus, actually came to the school, donned a hair net, and helped cook and serve the asparagus,” commented Starkweather.

According to Rice, “Most of the kids had never even SEEN an asparagus, but they cleaned their plates and are now asking their parents to buy the vegetable.” The farmer now sees the students and their parents regularly at his stand at the local Farmers Market.

Rice continued saying the children love eating the fresh food and their consumption of fruits and vegetables increased by nearly 200 percent since she started buying locally according to data that she has tracked since starting this program.

United States Department of Agriculture is preparing to announce the availability of competitive Farm to School grants worth up to \$100,000 for planning and implementing Farm to School programs – including supporting staff salaries, purchasing equipment, developing school gardens and other activities. For more information on these grants and about the National Farm to School Network, visit www.farmtoschool.org

The National Farm to School Network has established contacts in every state to help connect schools with local farmers. To find one in your state <http://www.farmtoschool.org/states.php>

For additional information on how schools and farmers can take advantage of Farm to School programs visit <http://www.cfra.org/renewrural/farmtoschool> for a host of ideas. Or contact Kathie Starkweather at the Center for Rural Affairs at kathies@cfra.org or (402) 617-7946.