

U.S. Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee Hearing
Economic Challenges and Opportunities Facing American Agriculture Producers Today

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Community Food Security Coalition
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Thank you Chairman Harkin, Senator Chambliss, and members of this Committee for the chance to speak with you today. The Farm Bill provides a strategic opportunity to reevaluate our current agricultural policy. My purpose here today is to describe the policies and programs that we urgently need to stay profitable, supply existing and emerging markets, and strengthen the small and family farms that are critical to food security and community vitality across America. The programs I want to ask you to protect and expand include those low-cost but high-impact programs that build successful community food projects, provide for farm to institution linkages, such as schools and hospitals, reduce risk to farmers, protect against disaster, and give much needed financial and technical assistance for distribution and processing of products so farmers can obtain a larger share of the food dollar.

I work for a non-profit organization in western North Carolina called the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, although I have also been a farmer as well. Our organization supports farmers and rural communities in the mountains of Western North Carolina and the Southern Appalachians by providing education, mentoring, and community and policy development. Our mission is to expand regional community-based food systems that are locally owned and controlled, environmentally sound, economically viable and health-promoting. To these ends, we help farmers in our region, many of whom are transitioning out of tobacco production, connect to local markets and institutions such as schools and hospitals. The experiences of North Carolina farmers transitioning out of tobacco could correlate well to any farmer trying to exit out of growing commodity crops, and we have found that developing skills and abilities to access local consumers has made the change easier for growers.

In doing this work, there are a number of barriers that we have found which, if lifted, have the potential to increase the amount of fruits and vegetable that farmers are able to deliver directly to consumers. In schools, confusion about USDA's rules related to local procurement means that even with competitive prices and a desire to support farmers in their region, schools are hesitant to purchase local products from family farmers in their region. By amending the Farm Bill - with a no-cost provision - to state that a geographic preference can be used when writing a bid for school food, farmers and kids will both benefit. Farmers will have increased access to a steady, reliable market and kids will have access fresh, healthy food in their cafeterias. Farm to cafeteria programs that introduce students the farmers that grew their food, and provide nutrition education, in addition to local food at schools, have been very successful in western North Carolina. Funding to support expansion of these kinds of programs would be very helpful, and we urge you to reauthorize increase funding for the Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program

As I'm sure you have heard from other witnesses before the Committee, hunger, obesity and other diet-related diseases, and food insecurity are all rising in both urban and rural areas. This is in part a result of the lack of affordable access to fresh fruits and vegetables and other foods vital to a healthy diet. Local food producers around the country are an important part of the solution, but they face major barriers in transporting their products to underserved markets including a lack of processing, distribution, and information technology infrastructure. Each community has a unique situation, and by supporting programs like the Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program, the Value Added Producers Grants, and the Farmers Market Promotion Program, you empower communities to find innovative solutions to their own problems, which over the long run will lead to increased sustainability. These existing and new policy tools to provide farmers access to domestic markets are urgently needed and I ask that you include them in the Farm Bill with increased funding.

To illustrate some of the points I've mentioned, I'd like to share a story with you. In order to show children where the locally grown food that was being served in their school cafeteria came from, we took children out to a farm. Children got to taste everything they saw growing but one plant in particular caught their attention - okra. Knowing they had permission to taste anything growing, they decided to sample the okra, raw. They loved it! The next day, these same children went to a local restaurant to cook the veggies and prepare a meal of the food they had seen growing the day before. The chef, who had also gone on the farm field trip and had witnessed this okra marvel, had some okra prepared for the children. They gobbled it all up and asked for more. A week or so later, the chef received a note from one of the parents, saying that her child had come home requesting okra and they promptly went to the store and bought some. The parent was amazed that the experience enthused her child about veggies, especially okra.

For greater detail on some of these specific provisions, I would like to enter for the record two recent documents, the Healthy Food and Communities Initiative, and the joint report by USDA and Community Food Security Coalition, Healthy Food, Healthy Communities - A Decade of Community Food Projects in Action. I thank you for your time and your leadership on behalf of a strong and vital food and agriculture system in the United States.