

Glyen Holmes

Executive Director, New North Florida Cooperative

South Regional Lead Agency Coordinator

National Farm to School Network

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Chairman Harkin, Senator Chambliss, Members of the Committee and other guests, thank you for giving me the opportunity to tell you about the many benefits of Farm to School Programs, about my experience working with the New North Florida Cooperative and the National Farm to School Network, and why you should support Farm to School initiatives in the Child Nutrition Reauthorization.

Originally from Mississippi, I have worked in small-scale agriculture most of my life. I worked with the USDA for 18 years before entering the private sector as Executive Director of the New North Florida Cooperative (NNFC). I have worked with farmers, school districts, and numerous other partners in Florida and throughout the Southern Region. One of these beneficial partnerships has been with Vonda Richardson, Extension Specialist for Florida A&M University Cooperative Extension Program, who has collaborated with the NNFC for over 12 years on promoting Farm to School efforts and is here with me today.

NNFC serves as one of the eight regional lead agencies for the National Farm to School Network and is the hub for Farm to School activities in the southern region. The purpose of the National Farm to School Network is to work towards institutionalizing and catalyzing Farm to School programs as viable models for improving the economic viability of family-scale farmers and supporting child nutrition efforts. In this role, NNFC provides free training and technical assistance, information services, networking, and support for policy, media, and marketing activities. We are based and work with school districts in Florida, but our regional responsibilities cover Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.

Through the Farm to School program, students in over 2000 school districts in 40 states are eating farm-fresh food for school lunch, breakfast, or snack. Farm to School programs enable every child to have access to more healthful food while simultaneously benefiting the community and local farmer by providing a consistent, reliable market. In addition to supplying nourishing, locally grown food in the cafeteria or classrooms, Farm to School programs often also offer nutrition and agriculture education through taste tests, school gardens, composting programs, and farm tours. Existing research shows that Farm to School programs influence students on many levels, increasing their knowledge and awareness about food sources, nutrition and agriculture, as well as improving their eating behaviors and lifestyles. Just having the choice of more healthful options in the cafeteria through Farm to School meals results in the consumption of more fruits and vegetables during school meals and at home.

Farm to School programs also provide great benefits to family farmers by opening up a local market for their products. Data from Farm to School programs suggests that local farmers gain a significant and steady market when schools dedicate a significant percentage of their purchases to them. For example, the New York City School District signed a \$4.2 million contract with farmers in upstate NY to provide apples for NYC schools over a three-year period. For most participating farmers, school sales represent 5 to 10 percent of their total sales. My organization is another example where farmers saw the advantage in sourcing to schools in order to stabilize their market.

As one of the pioneers of the Farm to School approach, the NNFC has been working with school districts providing fresh produce for school meals since 1995. NNFC has 60-100 farmers involved at any given time from the states of Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas. We have served over one million students in 72 school districts! The cooperative is responsible for the marketing, handling, processing, and delivery services of agricultural products produced by participating local small farm operators. The NNFC also hosts field trips that allow students to see first-hand where and how their food is grown and prepared.

To provide you more detail about our roots, in May 1995, a group of small, limited resource farmers from several counties in northern Florida met at the Florida A&M University Research & Extension Center in Quincy, FL to organize and develop a potential market for farm fresh produce. The farmers at the table were concerned about surviving in the farming business and wanted to find a way to preserve their land and way of life. They were well aware of the growing trend of farmers finding themselves in dire financial situations, often forced to sell the farm, and they had a strong motivation to save the family farm. Their idea was to provide a competitive price as a collective of small farmers and sell produce to local school districts, thus providing a supplemental income to the other aspects of farm business. By keeping farmer participants focused on one market (that of the school), the Cooperative

was able to build its capacity and avoid spreading themselves too thin – a common mistake in many new small business operations. The cooperative also worked with farmers to overcome destructive attitudes or perceptions based on previous failed relationships in order to foster new market relationships. As a result of this initial meeting, the NNFC was incorporated on October 18, 1995 and was established as a service-driven cooperative, providing its members with processing, transportation and marketing services.

In the early stages, NNFC had a very simple organization, consisting of three groups working together: participants, small farmers, responsible for what they do best - farming; a small force of part-time day laborers engaged in value-added processing; and a management team who provided the leadership, organization, market development, planning and coordinating. North Florida, where the program initially began, is an economically depressed area with high unemployment rates. Farm to School was a benefit for all: farmers, land use, children, schools, community, and the local economy. We saw that sourcing to schools would create a new market that could bring stability, profitability, and organization to small-scale farm operations. The farmers wanted bargaining power; to be “price-makers” instead of the usual “price-takers.” From the food service perspective, integrating fresh local produce into school meals was a nutritionally sound decision that benefited the local economy and community. It was a win-win-win situation. Our first delivery was 3,000 pounds of leafy greens to Gadsden County (FL) Schools. Today, the purpose of NNFC is to assist small-scale farmers in accessing alternative markets for their products, including assistance in crop production and distribution. Assistance in market development and networking of small farmers inter- and intrastate is one of our objectives. We work primarily at the school district level, but there are some state level efforts. Our efforts have demonstrated an innovative way to promote healthy eating and enhance nutrition for school meals while cultivating schools as a local market for small-scale farmers. We also provide training for food service personnel in menu planning, local product procurement, fresh produce storage and preparation.

Farm to School is more complicated than asking a farmer to grow a product and then instantly having local fresh products “ready to eat” or “ready to cook” at school lunch. NNFC has a storage, refrigeration, and processing facility where it operates its washing, cutting, and bagging equipment, so that schools, which often do not have full-scale kitchens, can receive ready to use products. The NNFC is able to offer local foods at competitive prices so that schools are not paying more to buy local. The processing and value-added packaging maintains the quality and freshness of their products, providing convenience to food services that are not able to handle fresh, “unprocessed” greens. The signature products we offer year-round are bagged collard greens and sweet potato sticks; we offer green beans

seasonally. Additionally, schools have purchased strawberries, blackberries, watermelon, okra, turnip greens, and muscadine grapes, as well as a variety of southern peas. It is often challenging to organize and manage delivery of fresh products to numerous sites that have varying requirements. We have managed to create an efficient system to handle distribution of products. We have a fleet of refrigerated trucks that make deliveries to schools one to two times a month, depending on the menus, so that the food arrives within one to two days of when it will be served. This system has made us a reliable distributor of quality produce.

NNFC has developed relationships with school districts to facilitate fresh, local (or regional) products grown by small-scale farmers. This effort is ground-level and self-supported. In my experience school districts that have participated with us have done so because they saw the value in it—the nutritional, cost-effective and social values. NNFC has worked with all types of schools, including rural and urban, small and large. The NNFC program provides a buffet of benefits. School districts are able to incorporate fresh, local products in school meals and increase the nutritional value of the food they offer their students. The farmers have access to an alternative market. The cooperative itself has created jobs for local residents. The cooperative provides a finished product in a manner that allows schools to treat them like any other vendor. The NNFC Farm to School model is successful because it benefits the school and local community without burdening food services.

We are often asked, “how is NNFC financed?” Initially, we received financial assistance mainly for the purchase of infrastructure and equipment to expand processing and distribution, along with a \$40,000 grant from the USDA Agriculture Marketing Service. Although grant money was used in the initial stage of the program, approximately 90 percent of the funding for the NNFC's marketing efforts now comes from direct marketing sales, which contributes to the sustainability of the Farm to School program today. Without this initial grant funding, the cooperative would not have come into existence, which is where we see the lasting benefit of a National Farm to School Grant Program.

Every child deserves the opportunity to eat food in school that ensures their health and well-being, and Farm to School programs are one solution to incorporating healthier foods into school meals. Support for farm to school efforts was included in the 2008 Farm Bill, which allows geographic preference in bidding for and purchasing food for school meals. While this mandate has been helpful, we are seeking simplification and a broader interpretation of the rules associated with geographic preference. We are currently working with the administration on rule changes that would streamline the administration of procurement processes (specifically to retain and strengthen paragraph (1)(D) of Section 122).

And, as the Child Nutrition Reauthorization approaches, Congress has the unique opportunity to

strengthen national Farm to School efforts. The 2004 Child Nutrition Act included one provision on Farm to School (section 122): a seed grant program with \$10 million in discretionary funding that has failed to receive an appropriation. In this Child Nutrition Reauthorization we ask for Congress to enact \$50 million in mandatory funding for section 122. This would fund 100-500 projects per year up to \$100,000 to cover start-up costs for Farm to School programs. These competitive, one-time grants will allow schools to develop vendor relationships with nearby farmers, plan seasonal menus and promotional materials, start a school garden, and develop hands-on nutrition education to demonstrate the important interrelationship of nutrition and agriculture—similar to the work we do on a daily basis. Please support other farmers, students, and communities in their desire to nourish the nation, one tray at a time through Farm to School programs.