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Washington Sustainable Food & Farming Network Receives USDA Grant to Increase Local Foods in School Cafeterias

MOUNT VERNON, WA –Washington Sustainable Food & Farming Network (The Network) is pleased to announce that they are one of 82 projects spanning 42 states and the Virgin Islands receiving support this year through the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Farm to School Program, an effort to better connect school cafeterias and students with local farmers and ranchers. The Network received an \$88,444 support service grant to increase access to Washington grown food for 42,000 students in 103 schools in northwest and central Washington.

“USDA is proud to support communities across the country as they plan and implement innovative farm to school projects,” said USDA Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack. *“Community partners are coming together to ensure a bright and healthy future for students, and local farmers and ranchers. These inspiring collaborations create long-term benefits for students, as they develop a meaningful understanding of where food comes from, and support our farmers and ranchers by expanding market opportunities for local and regional foods.”*

“As schools do more to provide healthy, nutritious food for students, we should do everything possible to help them take advantage of the amazing fresh fruits and vegetables grown by our local farmers,” said DeBene. *“The funds announced today will support successful programs that help connect local farmers with school districts eager to serve our students fresh, healthy, locally grown food.”*

USDA Farm to School grants help schools respond to the growing demand for locally sourced foods and increase market opportunities for producers and food businesses, including food processors, manufacturers, and distributors. WSFFN’s project aims to increase local food procurement in schools by implementing a more regional, seasonally-based Harvest of the Month program and by strengthening farm to school networks in Central and Northwest regions of Washington to support new partnerships between farmers and schools.

“We are thrilled to receive support from USDA” says WSFFN Executive Director Ellen Gray, *“Strengthening the purchasing relationships between farmers and ranchers and local schools helps our hardworking farmers, our kids and our economy.”*

The project will provide educational tools, professional development, networking opportunities, field trips, and technical training to enhance existing farm to school programs. WSFFN will partner with Whatcom Farm to School to strengthen farm to school networks in the northwest region of the state.

“This USDA funding comes at an opportune time to help move all of our programs forward in a significant way,” says Mardi Solomon, Whatcom County Farm to School Coordinator. *“With the support of the Whatcom Community Foundation, we have been able to generate farm to school momentum. Our focus is on the eight school districts in Whatcom County, but our perspective is expansive as we look forward to partnering with WSDA and WSFFN to facilitate farm to school program development across the state.”* More information about Whatcom Farm-to-School is available at whatcomfarmtoschool.org

Joan Qazi, WSFFN’s farm to school coordinator in Wenatchee says, *“This grant allows us to root farm to school in Central Washington and ensure that the health benefits to students and the economic benefits to farmers will flourish in years to come,”* Joan will work closely with key partners Wenatchee, Wahluke, Ellensburg and Ephrata School Districts and Cloudview Ecofarms in Royal City and Ephrata to increase school procurement of Washington grown food. More information about WSFFN’s Farm to School program is available at www.wsffn.org

USDA is focused on improving childhood nutrition and empowering families to make healthier food choices by providing science-based information and advice, while expanding the availability of healthy food. USDA's [Farm to School Program](#) is part of the [Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010](#), which authorized USDA to provide grants and technical assistance to help schools gain better access to local foods. For a complete list of fiscal year 2015 Farm to School grant recipients, please see: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool/grant-awards>

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