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Local and Regional Food Systems:

A USDA Priority

By Virginia Manuel

More and more consumers are looking to buy local and nutritional foods, and the USDA is supporting these efforts. The development of local and regional food systems is a critical component of its FY 2010–FY 2015 Strategic Plan. Locally, USDA Rural Development is leading the way to a healthier Maine—one that helps connect local farmers and communities to consumers who demand fresh produce grown on local Maine farms. This is the future of agriculture: a local chain of supply and demand that brings farmers face to face with consumers. People want to know their food has been grown from local soil, created local jobs, and kept hard-earned dollars in their own communities.

In response to a call from President Obama to reinvigorate local food systems, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced the “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” initiative on September 15, 2009. Through this important new initiative, the USDA is ensuring that its current programs are used effectively and new policies are developed in support of local and regional food systems.

USDA Rural Development is no stranger to investing in local and regional foods systems, having contributed more than \$5.4 million over the past five fiscal years to rural Maine communities. USDA has nine different programs in the form of loans, grants, and guarantees to help rural communities, businesses, and agricultural producers to support local agriculture.

Here are recent examples of projects funded by USDA Rural Development.

The Aroostook Band of Micmac Indians received a Rural Business Enterprise grant in the amount of \$492,363, which it is using to construct two buildings and two greenhouses to create a farmers’ market and nursery on U.S. Route 1 between Presque Isle and Caribou. The farmers’ market will be open to all local farmers who want to sell their produce. The public will be able to rent space to sell goods. The facility will be open year round, and will have space for cold storage.

The Maine Alternative Agriculture Association received a \$199,000 Rural Business Enterprise grant to renovate the Starks Grange Hall to include a new kitchen and cold storage. The association will contract with local farmers to provide farm products that will be collected, processed, and distributed from the new facility. The farm products will be “beyond organic” by emphasizing sound soil management and being pesticide free.

The Progress Center, a nonprofit organization in Norway, received a Community Facilities grant of \$84,000 through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The center will use the funds to renovate space for use as a community kitchen, allowing it to serve up to 200 meals a day, three days a week for town residents in need, using nutritious and locally grown food from the local farmers’ collaborative.

Dexter Regional Development Corporation received a Community Facilities grant of \$40,000 to create a year-round farmers’ market in Dexter. The Dexter Community Farm Project is an initiative in the town of Dexter to support local farmers and provide people in the area with fresh local produce. The project will also feature a kitchen that will have a variety of uses such as hosting workshops for farmers and the community.

Exeter Agri-Energy received Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) loan and grant funds of \$2.16 million. Stonyvale Farms is benefiting from the funds, which will finance Maine’s first large-scale methane anaerobic digester. This important project will help to save energy costs, increase the sustainability of the business, and save 24 agriculture-related jobs in Maine’s dairy industry. 🐄